

# Portals '95





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# **Portals**

The Literary Journal

of

**Purdue University North Central**

Volume 24

1995







*In  
Memory  
of  
John J. Pappas  
(1932-1995)*

# Foreword

From Michael Szymanski's experimental story "Visibility" to Sharon Koelm's award winning essay "The Alchemical Guides in 'Female Orations'," this issue of *Portals* offers a delightful and polished collection of stories, poems, essays, and photographs by students at the North Central campus of Purdue University. In keeping with tradition, written contributions to this issue of *Portals* have been drawn primarily from the annual Writing Contest, which is open to all students at Purdue North Central. The editors are grateful to Chancellor Dale W. Alspaugh for his generous and continued support; to Joy Banyas and Karen Prescott of the Publications Office; to *The Spectator*; to the judges of the Writing Contest, both faculty and students; to the photographers; to the writers.

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and Editor of *Portals*

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# Contents

Nancy Howell ..... cover  
Photograph

Nancy Howell ..... iii  
Photograph

Nancy Howell ..... viii  
Photograph

## Fiction

Michael Szymanski ..... 2  
Visibility

Traci Wozniak ..... 7  
Photograph

Stephanie Parnell ..... 8  
Is a Bug's Brain as Big as a Crumb?

Nancy Howell ..... 12  
Benny's Friend

Traci Wozniak ..... 16  
Photograph

Michael Szymanski ..... 17  
A Visual

Traci Wozniak ..... 20  
Photograph

## Poetry And Poetics

Nancy Howell .....	22
Slow Sax	
Michael Szymanski .....	23
Snail	
Michael Szymanski .....	24
In Honey	
Denise Underwood-Martine .....	25
Canto Hondo	
Susan Pedue .....	26
I Sketch the Words	
Marietta Rogers .....	28
Gwendolyn Brooks, The Light Within	
Marietta Rogers .....	36
Problems and Solutions in <i>Measure for Measure</i>	
Bonney Leckie .....	41
Unscheduled Lessons: The Life of Sora Neale Hurston	
Bonney Leckie .....	49
Marriage Made in Hell	
Kathy Hutcheson .....	53
Christina Rossetti and "Goblin Market"	
Lynn Przybylinski .....	62
Edith Warton: The Writer	
Nancy Howell .....	68
Photograph	



Sharon Koelm ..... 69  
The Alchemical Guides in “Female Orations”

Nancy Howell ..... 80  
Photograph

**Essays**

Nancy Farthing ..... 82  
The Spirit of Self Expression

Nancy Farthing ..... 85  
Stepping Stones to Power

Joseph Reeves ..... 88  
Love Rekindled?

Nancy Howell ..... 90  
Photograph

**Contributors**

Brief Biographies of Authors and Photographers ..... 91

*Nancy Howell*



# **Fiction**

Michael Szymanski

Stephanie Parnell

Nancy Howell



Michael Szymanski

# Visibility

## *slough*

If there were a submicroscopic amphibian that subsisted wholly on caffeine, it might have adapted the form of a tiny gilled frog that leaps from latte to latte. Perhaps nodules arc-arranged on the creature's nose could sense density variations, caffeine differentials.

Say caffeine might fuel its addiction to desirable, even necessary hallucinations against the scrim of its mind's eye in order to compensate for dim vision. Tiny sonar buds across its slick back could detect possible intruders at its feeding hole: sugar, spoon, lip.

Any jumping sequence of such a creature might land it at one particular table tonight.

## *ambience1*

Xylophonic chink of stainless against ceramic. Some sugar freak adjusts his saturation level intuitively; adding, stirring, bobbing to taffy-twisted James Brown samples laid against a hypnotic back-beat like a psychedelic but drugless transparency. Pink noise of the crowd on a Thursday night, when people itch and squirm for weekend freedom to blow money and neurons. The Vanishing Point, local coffee house. Machines hiss. Audio ribbons uncurl from the sound system.

## *bree*

She came from the coast. On foggy nights water lifted its skirts to creep through town and humankind imperceptibly devolved, reverting to more primal modes of perception, navigation. Bree stood out on the back porch of her old top floor apartment, thinking of islands. She imagined the crowns of other

buildings existing with hers at a nebulous dream-sea level through which the species moved in a medium conducive to a silent, senseless telemetry. Always, Bree felt a proto-sentience from fog, wished to float off into its damping veil and come into contact with... something.

Bree easily, sinuously makes her way back to her table from the press of the coffee bar, holding her drink and an empty white mug procured above crowd level. Sated, uncertain eyes on Harlan unaware at the table, the gyroscopes in her wrists and hips doing the work as she navigates candlelit semidarkness. Don't look directly, the afterimages blind. What the hell am I doing. She burst-vacuums thick froth from her coffee, noting the contrast between its airy viscosity and the undertow sensation, an encrypted smoky aromaflavor dissolving off the edges of her palate as she sits, don't really know y – – quickly her gaze leaps up steeled for his reaction. None, didn't say it thank God.

## *harlan*

Indiana plugged into the back of his brain, a leash that conducted current and gave him only so much room to roam. Harlan knew if he reached the end of his rope he would simply unplug and – lights out – sail on, a dead satellite.

He had chanced to let Bree peruse his process journal, the center of each college-lined page adorned with a yantra of ink from throwing his pen at it, depositing the accreted ink buildup from the point onto the white paper.

He remembers reading her eyes reading his pages, waiting. In his journal he records random fragments and observations, interweaving them into his writing: the honeybiled dissolution of couples, stirrings in the boughs of trees, sewer grates choked with meaningful detritus.

His index and middle fingertips press dimples into his temple, as if putting pressure on a wound. He drops his eyes from the base of her neck, the umbra of her sweater shadowskin ring. Beneath the table he slides damp fingertips cross-grain across his absorbent, unskinned manila corduroy pants.



## *ambience2*

Gyoto monks the polyphonic bass, Gregorian chants the midrange melodies, and Muslim prayer calls scintillated over all for upper range harmonics against African percussion. The pungency of cigarette smoke sidles up next to the density of fresh-ground beans. A finger explores the rough texture in the divot of a chipped mug. A toe slips from its sandal to roll floorgrit beneath its callous. A tiny circle, a ripple unseen, appears for no discernible reason in the oily surface of someone's French pressed coffee. The atonal drone of conversation fades in, out; a hive voice. Careful listening by the owner of any single voice sieves nothing specific from the crowd. Like unsynchronized movie dialogue, the human seasound undulated above and indifferent to its component makers.

## *bree*

The other night, afterwards, Bree asked Harlan what he was writing, thinking about. It surprised, amused her he took the question so seriously, holding it to his chest, expelling a sigh before answering. Bree smiled at him until he realized he was being teased. He blushed, the only man she'd ever met who did. She lay back down.

"Oh hey," she cues, passing over nimbly an empty mug above the paired dots of crisp, burning wicks. Harlan accepts it by its mouth, fingerpressures it down to the table.

"Hey what," he returns. Lambent brown eyes accommodate her with touching modesty in the afterglow of bedded twilight. She blinks hard the sun dust from her eyes, turning her head away from it.

"Nothing," she answers, sadly excited. Her eyes leap from each individual backlit strand on the periphery of his mane to another. Bree gathers herself to his sidelit face.

## *harlan*

He closes the book, slipping fingerpads across its curl-cornered paperboard cover. A concerned glance at the moneychangers' counter back of the house. He

shifts back to Bree who drops her eyes to the table. He stands, shoves a hand into a pocket.

“Thirty cents but I got a dollar,” he says to the candlewax-spattered tabletop, grating his chair across the faded floorboards. He takes up the cup, its unblemished lipring a perfect circle. Gripping firmly, the tightening of his lips unacknowledged, and unlooking to see if he is seen, Harlan brusquely taps the rim against the table’s edge.

### *ambience3*

Solar fingers slip from the lip of the horizon and drop down behind the silhouette of downtown. The rippling bubblesound of hot sipping. Searchlights of gold dust kleig into The Vanishing Point touching aslant minute flashes to the rims of coffee mugs, spoons, spectacles. On the sound system multilayered Towers of Babel continually reconstruct themselves, scatter, endlessly building beginnings that never plateau. Time-lapse haloes unmasked manifest themselves.

### *bree*

The ceramic fang arc-spins at an oblique angle, ascending. Unthinking he displays his hand and the chip falls, center of his palm. He smiles down to her, tosses the chip onto her side of the table and steps away towards the coffee bar to get his fill. Bree scoops the shard into her own hand, looking over its smooth curvature hanging among the spindly branches of her palm’s lines. Profile of chalk along the interior of the sickle. She allows herself to exhale.

### *harlan*

Attracted to the end of the line by bodies in parallel. Nearly seems to generate its own field, people standing in a row. Why is that? Harlan blinks. His lips purse slightly. Not now. Should I? The proximity of bodies before and after keep him in place in line while he looks up into the dim layer of cigarette smoke and black tile, mimicking sight. Touches slide across the murky surface of his skin’s memory.

"Can I help you," said the girl behind the counter. He presented her with the empty white mug.

"Fill it, please."

The girl, a survivor of fashionable black, turns from him to execute his wish, freezes, turns back.

"Would you like a new cup? This one's damaged?" Her eyebrows pivot on center axes. Toodark lipstick and buckteeth with translucent edges.

"No," faintly he says to her, through her.

He strives to remember some dream snatched, some past vastation.

At the sidebar he tries on and doffs questions, slowly adding sugar to his coffee. Stalling, he stirs it with a spoon and brings the mug up to his lips, pausing halfway before the initial slurp. Yes. Watching his cup he goes back to the table. The chair slides. Away from him. He stretches himself to approach it. Coffee down, a little spill. Mouth tightens. Wipes his fingers. His gaze leaps around, back, up almost to her.

Awkward. Words in red, flags on his white paper, litprof says: awk! Scoots his chair in closer.

*yaw*

"Come over tonight," he says.

Eyelock. Bree was convinced that when one gaze meets another's at the same instant, a kind of exchange takes place on a deeper level than the spoken word. She shifts her gaze into the setting of the sun. Dustmotes ignited suspended before her eyes, slowly revolving. She looks down to her mudless cup, back up to him and away again.

Bree closes her eyes and shivers; every warm, slowly unfolding contraction above and under the surface of her skin nearly a possibility.

"I don't know," she half-says into her palm, intently staring at the sun through the bare bramble of trees out the window as if looking for something, like she has to memorize them. Like she hasn't already.



*Traci Wozniak*





## Is a Bug's Brain as Big as a Crumb?

**E**xcuse me!" I said it with a tone of voice that conveyed *get-the he -- out-of-my-way* more than a polite request to please move. The objects of my frustration were a frazzled mother, her shopping cart, and two young children; one hanging from her purse strap and one whom she was trying desperately to place in the shopping cart's child seat. Regardless of the tone of my request, the woman glanced back at me, flashed a wary smile and said, "Oh, excuse me," while making a sincere effort to get out of my way. Feeling more like the back part of a shoe than a human being, I mumbled, "Don't worry about it," while hastily trundling my shopping cart past hers. As I turned at the end of the aisle, I could still hear her struggling to arrange her little child-cart-child trio.

Never mind! I didn't have time to worry about some woman and her children just then. I had exactly thirty-five minutes to get the groceries, get into and out of a checkout line, and into my car. I then had seven and a half minutes to get to Culligan Water Systems before they closed for the weekend to pick up a couple of five-gallon water bottles. I had considered cutting this errand out of my itinerary, but the thought of drinking well water that tasted like a tin can that had been setting in a ditch for about six months made my teeth rust. I decided that the Culligan trip was necessary and would take no more than twenty minutes. After that, I needed to deposit my husband's check, mail the bills, and get home in time to put the groceries away, iron my uniform, put it on, and run out the door for work. I was regretting having spent all afternoon studying for finals - but I also knew that it had been necessary. After all, it was Friday, I knew I would be working all weekend, and my first final was on Monday. Sunday was taken because I'd promised my husband I'd go to a matinee movie with him after church. I'd spent so little time with him all semester.

While thinking these things, I'd been piling fruits and vegetables in my cart with a look that had to be the picture of sheer determination. . . . "I WILL go shopping, I WILL do everything I need to do, and I WILL NOT let anything get



in my way! Neither pear, banana, orange, nor kiwi shall thwart my crusade! I WILL maintain my marriage, my self-imposed household obligations, my grade point average, and somewhere between sixty and seventy-five per cent of my sanity by the time this semester is over! And NO ONE is going to stop me." Although this is what my look must have said, I'm pretty sure those words didn't come out of my mouth at the time.

As I grabbed two oranges and deftly dropped them into a produce bag, I took off to go down the condiment aisle and promptly broad-sided the woman with her two children that had been the object of my frustration a few minutes earlier. She laughed and looked at me apologetically, knowing from my expression that it was her fault for being in the way – again. I graciously plastered a smile (grimace?) on my face and said, "I'm sorry," while shoving by her once again. The little boy in the cart who looked to be about two years old looked up from his engrossed play with a plastic key ring just long enough to see what had jarred him and immediately went back to his little plastic key world. As I wheeled past them I heard the purse-string child say, "Mommy, where do coffee beans come from?" And the mother's absentminded reply, "From Brazil where it's hot and rainy a lot." As I examined a bottle of Lite Ranch and compared it to a bottle of Fat Free Ranch, I heard the purse-string little boy ask, "How do they grow?" And then the mother's reply, "Hunh? – Oh, I don't know. Now be quiet, Mommy is trying to think."

"Ha!" I thought, with some self-satisfaction, "June Cleaver, mother of two has HER moments of aggravation too!" Feeling somewhat justified for my earlier behavior, I pushed on to the Baking Needs aisle. Although there was nothing I needed down that aisle, force of habit mandated that I weave up and down every aisle in the store ... after all I never knew when there was going to be some fantastic unadvertised special that I would be stupid to ignore. This week however, Baking Needs held no surprises and I was able to walk down two more aisles without any necessary objects that didn't happen to be on my list jumping in my cart. As I hurriedly rounded the end of the Cereal aisle, once again I nearly crashed into the two-child-mother-cart obstacle... This was too much! The head of the obstacle quipped, "We've got to stop meeting like this!" I made a vain attempt at a smile and once again went around her. In my haste, I nearly ran over her purse strap child who was crouched on the floor inspecting a bug. He looked up with his big brown eyes halfway occluded by bangs, grinned, and said, "Sorry lady," as he moved out of my way. I heard him say to his mother,

“Is a bug’s brain as big as a crumb?” This stumped me, but not the child-mom-cart head who said, “Well honey, I guess it depends on the size of the bug.” Somehow this struck me – in the middle of my frenzied, nearly-panicked rush as being the most profound bit of wisdom I’d ever heard anyone utter. I turned around and said in awe, “How’d you come up with that answer?” She laughed, probably as much from relief that I hadn’t snapped at her again as from the idiocy of the question I’d asked.

“He’s always asking me things like that. Yesterday he wanted to know what kept flies from falling down when they land on the ceiling. These are not bits of knowledge I needed to know to get an accounting degree. They just don’t address these types of questions – but he’s given me a lot of practice in answering them over the past few months.”

I said, “Well that was a great answer,” and, stumped for anything more to add at this most profound moment of mine, I slowly turned around and dazedly proceeded down the aisle. All of a sudden my mind was on nothing but the simplicity of the little boy’s question and the ease at which his wise mother had answered.

Somehow all my pressing obligations, all the information I’d been drilling into my head for finals, all my tension seemed to be removed from my shoulders by some industrial strength forklift. The little boy in the cart who was oblivious to all else but those keys and the little boy with the bug brain question seemed to me geniuses in a world of severely mentally retarded people. And their mother, through association, seemed to have gleaned a good deal of their intelligence.

Somewhere between the Cereal aisle and Dairy Products, a few things became very clear to me. Most adults seem to forget what the important questions in life really are, and if they don’t forget, most don’t bother to ask. The answers to the important questions in life don’t come in texts or manuals because the answers to the important questions in life are already part of each and every one of us. They are there for our taking and use . . . if we’d only take the time to take the keys, be silent and oblivious to the noise around us (like the little boy in the cart) and discover what lies behind all the distractions in life. And the reason we adults don’t know the questions to ask is because somewhere between asking questions about bug brain sizes and answering bug brain questions we forget how to ponder. And those lucky few who don’t forget how to ponder become our heroes. Benjamin Franklin wondered about a lightning bolt, the Wright

brothers wondered about flight, and someone a very long time ago wondered what two sticks rubbed together would do.

All of a sudden I felt sickened by the limitations and constraints I'd put on my brain. I began to wonder if MY brain was as big as a bug's. Then, at that moment, I made a decision to take the time to wonder, to shut off the car radio on the way to work once in a while, to shut off the TV now and then and allow myself to wonder, and maybe, just possibly, to expand my brain size past that of a bug's brain.



## Benny's Friend

**H**e refused the ride, but told her he was grateful just the same. He watched the car go down the street with eyes that had a diminished quality, as if the irises had turned a peculiar blue in his many winters, almost indistinguishable from the whites. Perhaps faded was too harsh a description. He had lied when he said he might have accepted the ride if he was not on his way to the museum down the street. That lie was being turned over and examined like the fine linen handkerchief he had found in the street that morning, and his thoughts began to thread their way into a solution for his confusion at seeing the woman in the car. He would go to the museum. The walk was not far.

The woman who had offered the ride looked like one he had known years ago. He didn't smile at this realization, but continued to his new destination, wondering why recent memories blurred, while the past, especially what he would rather not remember, stands out as clearly as his breath in the cold. There was no distant past any longer. Boyhood days at the creek and adolescent parties swirled in water containing fish and dancers alike, as well as family members whose faces were only as clear as the ripples on its surface. All except the woman. He might have seen her in that car just now.

He had been depending on his cane for many years but now it seemed almost a twin to the man whose skin had the same weathered appearance, as if stick and man were branching from each other. His path was marked with muffled notes from the cane, sounding his slowed progress. His grip on the handle was tightly drawing the reddened skin to white across the bones of his hand as he thought about the woman from the past. They had been together a short time. He shouldn't have asked her to marry. "No chains," she said. "I want to make an honest woman of you," he said. She had just put her things in a bag and left, saying he didn't know what either love or honesty was. He never knew how to tell her that when they were together he felt as if he didn't exist. He never knew how to tell her that when they were together, he felt warm and whole.

Anyone near enough to the man, might have wondered at the thoughts behind his eyes, the usually diminished gaze giving way to a warmth and then

suddenly shutting down to their far quality. His breath comes harder now. Tiny particles begin to form on his beard. His movements become discordant with his thoughts, so that he trips on the curb, his cane appearing useless, becoming part of his total picture of confusion. As he regained his balance, he thought that he might have accepted the ride. He had seen her in the coffee shop before. He remembers how she had wrapped her fingers around the cup to keep her hands warm. He always did that. He could tell the cup was too hot at first because of the way she surrounded it with her hands, gently pressing her finger tips, like the toes first try the water before swimming. He had noticed the resemblance then, so he had concentrated on her hands. He was almost to the museum now, thankful for something to do, somewhere to go.

He felt his stomach growl and grasped this benign hunger to him, trying to forget the woman. He thought about the cans of soup on the open shelf in the kitchen and about his daughter's last visit. She called, but never came back after he had told her to mind herself and not him. She said, that was fine, she couldn't stand to see him living like he did, when he could be living in one of those nice clean homes. Damn. Don't women ever think of anything but cleaning? Couldn't she just sit down and talk awhile? She had rarely looked him in the eye, but had watched his hands instead. He couldn't control the tremor anymore and it had galled him that she saw. He had a sudden sense of an urgency in those visits. He had a vague notion that her study of his hands had been as most study a face; and though he fights the memory of the day she left, it makes a steady surface to his eyes.

It was warm. Belle was there fussing over the clothes. "Brown? Little girls should wear bright colors, George, and these shoes! And there are no socks in this bag. Where are all her socks?" He listened to her hands rummaging through the paper bag. He is glad it isn't a suitcase. It would make things seem so final. He wants to straighten himself out. "Lord, look at her hands! She must pick up everything that moves." His eyes avoid hers and he focuses on the unopened package of cookies that she brought, as if this was some sort of celebration. "Yes, Jen likes to find things when we walk."

The old man has a flash of pain that stops him. His eyes now only see his daughter's small fingers rubbing the condensation from the sides of a glass of milk, then spreading them out in front of her eyes to watch them dry. Her eyes slowly move to his face when Belle asks about the socks. He looks at the glass instead when Belle asks about Jen's hands, concentrating on the grey smears



against the white and wondering how he let all this happen. Then there are no words, only the small shoulders in his arms. He watches the glass until there is no moisture on the sides and he can only see the milk, a dim white against the dark of the kitchen.

Anyone near enough to the old man would know that he was no longer on the street. They might have held his arm until they thought he'd be fine, but he comes back by himself. He is alone, as his cane smacks against a barricade protecting a large hole where water is gushing out of a pipe. He watches the water running off, listening.

It must have been a long while since Benny had come to bring him that soup and whiskey when he was sick. Benny's whiskey was warm and he liked Benny, even if he talked too much. He had met Benny coming out of a bar, waving a book in his hand, and shouting about the credibility of the author to any sympathetic ear that he could find outside his favorite haunt. The old man thought of how he always wished he had something interesting to say to get Benny to stay and talk a little longer. He began to look forward to these usually one-sided conversations, watching Benny's gesturing with hands that always seemed married to his words. He started taking his books to the bar to read instead of his apartment. He liked the way Benny looked him straight in the eye when he talked and the way Benny always yelled, "How now, friend George?" whenever he saw him. He thought he had heard that Benny had died. Or maybe he was just sick. The old man hoped so.

The museum seems like a haven from his unwanted thoughts. He stumbles on the top step and catches himself from the fall. The railing feels cold and his loneliness feels new to him. Suddenly he is very happy to have the museum steps under his feet and his hand on the door and his eyes well up when he sees the door won't open. The museum is closed. He reaches for what he sees in the glass.

After awhile, he pulls a sleeve across his eyes, the soft linen forgotten in his coat pocket. Turning slowly, he starts down the stairs, feeling his head to make sure he has a hat. At the bottom he sees that he has left his gloves somewhere and he stares at his hands splayed red against the backdrop of cement. Glancing with hesitation in both directions, he chooses his path, oblivious to his wet face and the clatter of the cane falling from its resting place against the museum door. He is only thinking that he is glad that he didn't have the phone taken out. He won't let it ring without answering anymore. It might be someone important. It might be Benny.

The old man smiles when he thinks of the empty bottle in its place in the kitchen, with its brown and aging label, wondering about how warm he feels when he sees the sun passing through it.





# A Visual

## *counterview*

*right pan:* across twin shot gift sets and a life-sized cutout of [flicker; ascending static line, a thin horizontal bar of arctic] Kathy Ireland.

*zoom:* increase grain, magnification. Silversheen and hungry black diffused in low-grade video translation, stripes and banners of blue-violet.

*continue pan:* a hand—then gone.

*continue pan:* a hand, rolled robin's egg shirtsleeves. A shoulder, crescent of wrinkle. Blue-grey derma. Tiny black hairs. Watch glint. Torso eclipse: a hand flutters to the small of a back where apron strings are tied. A docked cigarette uncurling phantom banners left to right.

*continue pan:* male pattern baldness over the sheen of a tight scalp. Malleable lump of nose and hectic twin caterpillar eyebrows. The head bobs and nods around an invisible center axis, holds, begins to shake. Hands flap like glass-disoriented pigeons in front of the cotton chest. The head shakes violently with heated fervor.

*up:* a downpour of blur.

*back, stop:* light blue field jacket filled with snaggle-hooded sweatshirt, filled with disintegrating tanktop, filled with glistening dark skin stretching over a neck around which rests a metal chain. An arm [flicker] emerges pulling a hand pulling a piece from a roomy pocket. The weapon is a non-reflecting blue-black L of emptiness, a darting passenger in the shining palm pressed against it. Motion blur as the clerk's hands rocket upward. The slim black rectangle dances before the clerk's face. A dark blue hand with [full-screen static flash] extended forefinger jabbing rigidly at the air.

## *atm vestibule*

*close-up:* hand with chewed nails housing black crescents of urban body grime. Fingers delicately pinch the slick and wafer-thin plastic; recede to discover plate

glass, double doors, turquoise-striped walls and bathroom-blue tiled floor. Eclipse by an eye opening wide. The brow above the eye jerks upward twice. Trailing a broad flared nose and a smiling mouth missing the left upper incisor, the eye swims away, receding to point elsewhere, revealing plate glass, double doors, turquoise-striped walls and bathroom-blue tiled floor. A block of dark opaques the door glass. The dark grows [rising static line scans the screen] an arm, the arm deploys fingers to tug at an earringed lobe on their way to the door's PUSH panel. Shoulders and a backward A's cap cross the threshold and veer right, revealing the opposite side of a highly trafficked boulevard. Small awning above a barred door and square meshed-over window. Multiple neon sign wheel: Miller, OPEN, O'Doul's, BOURBON BOULEVARD LIQUORS, Budweiser. In the middle of the sky-lit tubing a pale counter supporting canisters of beef jerky, racks of cigarettes, test tube cigars, corkscrews. Centerpiece a vibrating hand slick against a shadowy dark L shape. The gun pops backwards, twice. Two silent flashes of blue-white light blossom [video scorch] from the barrel one after another, nanosecond chrysanthemums.

The gun hand holds still, still. Blur to the right and it's gone. A shape arcs over the countertop, blending denim, faded canvas, workboot tread. Scatter of useless checks flutter, exponentially returning the fluorescent like jackstraw paper moons. Left-right blur behind the counter. Onto the leaf-strewn sidewalk opens the door propelled by dark fingers wearing faded nails. Hood, hat brim, jumpy eyes, indeterminate shadows, a neck around which rests a chain of metal. Left-right-left go the eyes, the man saunters out of range.

### *aisle-view*

*left pan:* sliding perspective, receding rows of dustless bottles, boot-printed door with a fingerprinted window with a chickenwire skeleton. Nicotine film. Opening door: black leather fingers engaged in a delicate maneuver around the tarnish.

*pull back:* Crisp cuff, glint. Black wool up to square shoulder, tiny puff of ear, hair like a light charcoal sketch. Preacher's hat. Jowls. Black wire frames. Walking slowly, inspecting the [flicker] merchandise thoughtfully, bottom lip pooched out. Shined shoe leather flash fractal [video burn, tone bleed] Trouser creases. One step. Two steps. Door swings shut. Three steps. Four. Five. One



kid-gloved hand holds the lapel open for the other. In it goes and out it comes gripping a deadly light-eating geometry with a long cylinder screwed onto the end of the barrel. Egg drop eyes acquire an off-screen target. Freeze and go from nearly monolithic to almost insectile: blur down to the round and out of sight as the figure drops simultaneous with the opening door and the emergence of hood, hat, eyes, shadows, neck, chain, field jacket. Quick look around, quick steps and quickly stepping out of range. The hidden watches, murder machine hanging loosely at his side. Slow smile. Two minute flinches, two tiny reflections glint flash across the glass of his spectacles. Drops again, smiling broadly, whiteout teeth. Door opens, step through, door closes. The overcoated stands full height, grinning jovially. He raises the gun arm before him, gazing upon the weapon. Eyebrows up. Laughterless laugh. One kid-gloved hand opens the lapel for the other, pushing the slim flat black of it back into its quick release holster. A shrug. A wave. Door opens, step through, door closes.

*Traci Wozniak*



# Poetry and Poetics

Nancy Howell

Michael Szymanski

Denise Underwood-Martine

Susan Pedue

Marietta Rogers

Bonny Leckie

Kathy Hutcherson

Lynn Przybylinski

Sharon Koelm



*Nancy Howell*

## **Slow Sax**

Soft light  
Reflects on metal  
Slowly undulating  
In hands that finger  
Entrance into a vessel  
Where breath  
Is sacrificed and born  
Through darkness

To light the ear  
Enfolding the drum  
In the listener  
With healing breath  
And helping  
The too full heart  
In bearing  
Its burden

Michael Szymanski

# Snail

startled by the voice just a whisper whipped around spinning bedclothes  
and sweat to see the receding shadow shrink down through the door I said what  
the hell're you doing?

Hey, Quad:

Here's your pack of iron,  
They say

Fat on my belly?

What I crawl on,  
I say

Timecuffed and knotjawed,  
Disbelieving and stretchweak,

I am

Awakening in shoe grit and nothingless.

At the intersection.

Waiting for green.

A pack of running strays slice between two  
cars across the street. The dogs rapid puffs of  
carbon monoxide from a side exhaust, my  
burning eyes

deceived.

Michael Szymanski

## In Honey

We will be  
Still like living  
Photographs  
In your book:

lacquer and sheen,

We will each be  
A stunted pupa;  
A chrysalis of  
Only yesterday  
And gold:

fireflies in amber

We will shut up  
Our eyes our mouths,  
And we will be  
Covered up sweetly:

covered in honey.



*Denise Underwood-Martine*

## **Canto Hondo**

He flows with resolute rhythm  
Locked in the swing and roll  
Of hip to thigh  
Measured in the muscled harmony  
Of shoulder to blade.

He rides an ancient swell  
And the grace of less than random  
Chords scatter like feathery seeds  
In his widening wake.

Tight timing in a loosening groove,  
He is the Deep Song  
Echo of the first note  
The rearranging of water.

## **I Sketch the Words**

I take my pen  
and  
sketch the words—

In the weary early morn',  
(an hour well visited by authors—)  
I listen to the rhythmic  
rise and fall, rise and fall  
Of loved ones breathing  
in a room beyond—

The rhythm of the rain patter on  
the gently groaning roof  
and  
the awning yawns  
from autumn fatigue—

Against this orchestration,  
My pen, weaver of words,  
scratches out their cadence—

Words filter through my senses,  
one and then,  
another.  
Until they tap out their tempo  
in my eager soul.

Such melodious interludes,  
A rhapsody of Words  
poise themselves,  
majestically,  
on my paper:  
Creators of Thought, Conveyors of Meaning,  
Entice the Emotions, Seduce the Language:  
Words—

And when by chance some  
misplaced Word or phrase  
finds its way to  
the tip of my pen,  
How can I crumple or erase it  
when in their kind consideration  
lent themselves,  
magnanimous,  
to my thought process?—

—For an Author  
will steep Words like one will steep tea:  
slowly,  
methodically,  
to inhale the aroma—

Then,

In a cavalcade of meaning,  
this ever rising orchestration  
peaks to its crescendo,  
As every fiber of my being pours forth,  
intoxicated by the moment,

As I sketch the Words,  
In the weary early morn'.



Marietta Rogers

## Gwendolyn Brooks, The Light Within

Phosphorescence.

Now there's a word to lift your hat to . . .

To find that phosphorescence, that light within,  
that's the genius behind Poetry.

– Emily Dickinson

One of the bright, consistent lights of contemporary poetry is Gwendolyn Brooks, a major poet who lives in Chicago, Illinois. A prolific writer, Ms. Brooks has had five major books of poetry published: *A Street in Bronzeville*, *Annie Allen*, *The Bean Eaters*, *Selected Poems*, and *In The Mecca*. In addition, she has written a novel, *Maude Martha*; her autobiography, *Report from Part One*; and several smaller books.

Brooks has won numerous fellowships, grants, and awards. In 1950 she was the first black person to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for her book, *Annie Allen*. In 1968 she became Poet Laureate of Illinois. In 1994 Gwendolyn Brooks was awarded the National Book Foundation Medal for her lifetime contributions to literature.

As with most writers, her childhood was the foundation for her remarkable talent. She was born June 17, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas. Within five weeks of her birth, her family moved to Chicago where she still lives today. In his book, *Gwendolyn Brooks*, Harry B. Shaw describes her childhood and the influence of her father, David Anderson Brooks, the son of a runaway slave:

The commonplace incidents which Gwendolyn Brooks remembers about her father are in themselves somewhat indicative of the love they shared and the mellow influence he had on her character and poetry. Whatever he did—whether reading stories, singing, giving recitations, or just smiling with his kind eyes — Gwendolyn . . . saw him as a figure of power. That Gwendolyn noticed these common traits and

took inspiration from them reflects her propensity for being stimulated by and ascribing considerable significance to incidents and situations of everyday life. (14-5)

At a very early age she showed an inclination to write, and at the age of seven she began rhyming. A shy child who loved to daydream, Gwendolyn Brooks “either preferred the solitude or accommodated it by creating through her dreams and later through her poetry a world teeming with approachable, often likable people.” Her parents encouraged and supported her blossoming talent. “At Christmas . . . Gwendolyn always received books, and she as regularly used to go behind the Christmas tree every year and read for hours by the tree light when the relatives were gone and the others were in bed. For Gwendolyn these were gifts that gave forever” (Shaw 18-9).

Gwendolyn Brooks is frequently and eloquently compared to other major poets. Her poetry is part of the huge body of verse, prose poetry, and poetic prose which, like a vast river, has been flowing onward since ancient times. It is the art of language. Language is made of many word symbols that are combined to express ideas from one individual to another. Poetry takes this already complicated communication medium, condenses it, and charges it with meaning.

Each poem, as a piece of art, captures a thought forever. According to Wordsworth, a poem is emotion recollected in tranquillity. Like the other arts – painting, sculpture, music, etc. – poetry freezes a moment to treasure forever. It has a definite point of view, tone, and rhythm. Each poem must reveal itself in its own unique way. Like life itself, poetry is filled with joy, sorrow, melancholy, love, loss, any and all human emotions.

Poetry, however, requires a commitment from the reader. It must be read in a more thoughtful manner than a novel or short story. The language of the poet is different. It expresses that which is inexpressible. Poetry frequently contains allusions to other poems or literature. This broadens the meaning and deepens the understanding of the piece. Additionally, it provides a literary, historical, or social context. Poetry is timeless and should be reread and reconsidered over a period of time in light of new knowledge and understanding.

Poets express what they feel is significant. These messages are jewels, treasures that must be sought out and possessed by each individual. To partake in this vast body of poetry is to share in the thoughts, hopes, dreams, and longings of humankind in the most intimate sense. If we are wise, we'll embrace poetry and allow it to enrich our lives.

I have included four poems by Gwendolyn Brooks; each reveals itself in a unique way. Ms. Brook's Pulitzer Prize-winning book of poetry, *Annie Allen*, which was published in 1949, is divided into three sections: "Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood," "The Anniad" (the *Annie Illiad*), and "The Womanhood." "[O]ld relative" is from the first section.

### *old relative*

After the baths and bowel-work, he was dead.  
Pillows no longer mattered, and getting fed  
And anything that anybody said.

Whatever was his he never more strictly had,  
Lying in long hesitation. Good or bad,  
Hypothesis, traditional and fad.

She went in there to muse on being rid  
Of relative beneath the coffin lid.  
No one was by. She stuck out her tongue; slid.

Since for a week she must not play "Charmaine"  
Or "Honey Bunch," or "Singing in the Rain."

Although it deals with death, this delightful poem has a wry, humorous tone, and elicits a warm emotional response. It has a universal feeling, and this universality draws us into the poem. We can see ourselves or someone we know as this child.

The poem also contains the classic struggle between life and death, youth and age. Age makes its final demand and youth must yield. Life must wait and its lively songs must be silent for one more week. Structurally, the poem is comprised of "three rhyming tercets and a concluding couplet, all in iambic pentameter; tercets within [the] poem slant rhyme" (Melhem, 58).

The next two poems are from Ms. Brooks' first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, published in 1945.



## *the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon*

I think it must be lonely being God.  
Nobody loves a master. No. Despite  
The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright  
Determined reverence of Sunday eyes.

Picture Jehovah striding through the hall  
Of His importance, creatures running out  
From servant-corners to acclaim, to shout  
Appreciation of His merit's glare.

But who walks with Him?—dares to take His arm,  
To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,  
Buy Him a Coca-Cola or a beer,  
Pooh-pooh His politics, call Him a fool?

Perhaps—who knows?—He tires of looking down.  
Those eyes are never lifted. Never straight.  
Perhaps sometimes he tires of being great  
In solitude. Without a hand to hold.

Religion is a major theme in Ms. Brooks' work. However, her religion is heavily tempered by common sense. In this poem God is physically brought into our world. He is examined in everyday terms easily identifiable by the common reader. This unique point of view doesn't diminish the majesty of God; it simply makes Him more approachable. The warm common touch of this poem invites us to read it again and again. Melhem comments on the technical merits of the poem:

The four quatrains, based on iambic pentameter, rhyme in the second and third lines of each stanza and irregularly slant rhyme in the others. The effect recesses the rhyme as a harmony withdrawn into the stanza and shielded or disguised by the outer lines. It is as if God were withdrawn into the stanzas, himself trapped by ritual and remoteness. (28)

## *the mother*

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not get,  
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,  
The singers and workers that never handled the air.  
You will never neglect or beat  
Them, or silence or buy them with a sweet.  
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb  
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.  
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,  
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my  
dim killed children.  
I have contracted. I have eased  
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.  
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized  
Your luck  
And your lives from your unfinished reach,  
If I stole your births and your names,  
Your straight baby tears and your games,  
Your stilted or lovey loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches,  
and your deaths,

If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.  
Though why should I whine,  
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—  
Since anyhow you are dead.  
Or rather, or instead,  
You were never made.

But that too, I am afraid,  
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?  
You were born, you had a body, you died.  
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you  
All

This is a poignant, compelling poem. It deals with the painful subject of abortion, but it doesn't preach or condemn. This poem celebrates life and children; it explores the many tiny events in a child's life. "[T]he mother" is the title of the poem; however, it is not simply one woman's sorrow over the loss of her children. Rather it is the voice of humankind mourning the loss of all aborted babies. In a universal sense, mankind grieves their loss. I think it is significant that this poem was written in the 1940's. The struggle, current as today's headlines, is also timeless. Melhem explains the structure of the poem:

The poet employs full rhyme with a touch of slant in this forty-two-line poem, very irregularly metered. The first stanza rhymes five couplets; the second alternates rhyme in the first six lines, then continues the couplet pattern. The meter, rolling insistent, often anapestic, conveys the profound agitation of the speaker. Tonal control, especially in the first stanza, heightens tension. (23)

The poem on the following page is from a collection of eight poems entitled *Family Pictures*, published in 1970. This collection, along with *In The Mecca* (1968) and *Riot* (1969) were written after Ms. Brooks was persuaded by "a number of young black poets . . . that 'Black poets should write as blacks, about blacks, and address themselves to blacks,'" (Gilbert, 1853).



## Young Africans

of the *furious*

Who take Today and jerk it out of joint  
have made new underpinnings and a Head.  
Blacktime is time for chimeful  
poemhood  
but they decree a  
Jagged chiming now.

If there are flowers flowers  
must come out to the road. Rowdy! –  
knowing where wheels and people are,  
knowing where whips and screams are,  
knowing where deaths are, where the kind kills are.

As for that other kind of kindness,  
if there is milk it must be mindful.  
The milk of humankindness must be mindful  
as wily wines.  
Must be fine fury.  
Must be mega, must be main.

Taking Today (to jerk it out of joint)  
the hardheroic maim the  
leechlike-as-usual who use,  
adhere to, carp, and harm.

And they await,  
across the Changes, and the spiraling dead,  
our Black revival, our Black vinegar,  
our hands, and our hot blood.

This is a song of rage in the language of the street. It demonstrates how poetry can transcend the barriers of language and generation. The thoughtfully chosen words are heavy with meaning and significance. It is a plea for harmony in the midst of discord. It carries a warning to beware those who would use violence as a tool for peace. It is a cry for cool heads to temper "our hot blood." Melhem notes the powerful structure of this poem:

From the first person (primarily) Brooks proceeds through indicative and imperative moods, addressing both the "Young Africans" and the reader/listener, and concludes in the first person plural. The free verse, irregular line length, and flexibility of voice create an exciting alteration, a rhythm of statement and expansion or commentary . . . Action generates much of the poem's energy. Abstract concepts take action and jarring verbs, as in "Who take Today and jerk it out if joint." (206-7)

Robert Frost said that poetry is a way of taking life by the throat. This is certainly true of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry. Her poetry captures the essence of life and shows it from her unique point of view. In her poetry she defines her world and her readers/listeners are in some way translated, changed forever. She enlightens us with her poetic genius, her phosphorescence.

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## Problems and Solutions in 'Measure for Measure'

**W**illiam Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, though tragic in content, is classified as a comedy. As William B. Bache explains, "A Shakespeare comedy can be considered a kind of tragedy, the end of which has been carefully avoided or substantially changed" (*Design* 16). "In a Shakespeare comedy," Bache explains, "marriage is the symbolic sanction given to, or found by society, a redress of human order, an order that is achieved after the ugly world has been corrected and instructed" (*Design* 13). This notion is certainly true in *Measure for Measure*, in which the ugly world, Vienna, is in a state of moral collapse due to the ineffectual leadership of its ruler, Duke Vincento.

By the end of the play, the main characters are corrected and instructed. They marry and ultimately restore a sense of order to Vienna. Bache notes: "A Shakespeare comedy is a dance that ends in marriage; a Shakespeare tragedy is a race that ends in death" (*Design* 16). The reverse, however, is also true: A Shakespeare comedy is a race that ends in marriage; a Shakespeare tragedy is a dance that ends in death.

One way to approach a Shakespeare play is by identifying the public and private issues. As Vernon P. Loggins explains, "The first several scenes of a Shakespeare play of course introduce the major characters, but they also set in motion the major concerns of the play and establish the tensions that will be explored as the play unfolds" (7).

This notion may be applied to *Measure for Measure*. For instance, 1.1 reveals the public problem from the Duke's point of view: Vienna is in dire need of moral cleansing. The Duke feels responsible because he was too lenient and did not enforce the laws. His solution is to contrive a story that he is going on a journey and to appoint the seemingly virtuous Lord Angelo to be in charge during his absence:



Hold therefore, Angelo.—

In our remove be thou at full ourself.

Mortality and mercy in Vienna

Live in thy tongue and heart. Old Escalus

Though first in question, is thy secondary. (1.1.43-7)

The Duke knows the strictly moral Angelo will coldly enforce the law. He asks the wise Lord Escalus to help Angelo. Bache observes that the two sets of double items in the third and fourth lines apply to Angelo and Escalus. Angelo is first in command as the Deputy of the absent Duke and Escalus is second. Angelo possesses the first items in the third and fourth lines: mortality and the tongue. Escalus has the second items, mercy and the heart. “By leaving his role in Vienna, the Duke is giving mortality and the tongue to Angelo and thus making mercy and the heart, upon which human life depends, subservient to Angelo’s will” (“*Measure*” 13).

Similarly, 1.2 is set on a street and shows the public problem from the public point of view. The people have begun to feel the sting of Angelo’s merciless justice. This scene is filled with questions and confusion. Mistress Overdone says the word “what” twelve times in fifteen lines. The people are desperately searching for enlightenment and understanding. Claudio, in his conversation with Lucio, relates the public view of the public problem:

From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty.

As surfeit is the father of much fast,

So every scope by the immoderate use

Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,

Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,

A thirsty evil, and when we drink we die. (1.2.129-34)

Thus the public view of Vienna’s problem is the same as the Duke’s: the city is in dire need of moral cleansing. However, the Duke’s solution, Angelo, makes matters worse. In order to solve Vienna’s problems, the characters must address their own private problems. In *Measure for Measure*, as in all Shakespeare’s plays, the public and the private concerns converge.

The private problems are revealed through passages that have poetic emphasis. E.M.W. Tillyard explains:

... in learning that a certain type of image occurs frequently in a play we may easily forget that frequency, a mere numerical thing, may mean

little compared with poetic emphasis: that a certain type of image occurring once but in a poetically emphatic place may have more weight than another type that occurs ten times in less emphatic places. We need in fact a weighing machine . . . But such a machine is imaginary and the only substitute is the reader's appreciation of the total poetic effect. (10)

In *Measure for Measure*, these poetic images help to reveal the characters. One such image is found in 1.1, in which the Duke compares human virtue to a lighted torch:

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,  
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues  
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike  
As if we had them not. (33-6)

To be useful, a torch must be set on fire and be visible. Likewise, human virtue must be lit by heavenly fire and be made visible to the world. Light or fire has many meanings and uses: it consumes, it purifies, it tempers or strengthens, it tests or corrects, it supplies light and warmth, and it can be a beacon or a warning. It also symbolizes enlightenment, knowledge, or understanding. Man's virtue is intended to shine forth like a lighted torch, benefiting others in diverse ways. In *Measure for Measure*, each character needs this spark of divine fire to purify his virtue and enable him to enlighten and correct his world.

The second part of this passage shows the consequences of not going forth, or being visible, of hiding one's light under a bushel. The Duke's failure in authoritative leadership is exacerbated by his lack of going forth: "I love the people, / But do not like to stage me to their eyes" (1.1.68-9). He isolates himself in his palace to avoid his subjects.

The Duke gradually moves from indoor scenes to outdoor scenes, from dark into light. The settings for the Duke's scenes are significant because they symbolically reveal his progression from isolation, darkness, and ignorance into humanity, enlightenment, and understanding. His first four scenes are set indoors: an apartment in the Duke's palace (1.1), a monastery (1.3), and a room in the prison (2.3, 3.1). In 1.3 the Duke meets Isabella who reveals Angelo's real nature. This knowledge effects a change in the Duke. His remaining scenes are set out of doors except for his brief return to the prison to stop Claudio's execution. By the end of the play, the Duke has become an effective leader who brings his court out to his subjects at the city gate.

Act 4.1 is set in a moated grange, emphasizing the fact that the characters in the scene (the Duke, Isabella, and Mariana) have separated themselves from the world. The one character who most clearly defines isolation, Angelo, is missing. His presence, however, is clearly felt throughout the scene.

The scene begins with a song to cheer Mariana. However, this song may be applied to Angelo, for it reveals the essential Angelo: his past, present, and future.

Take, O, take those lips away  
That so sweetly were forsworn,  
And those eyes, the break of day,  
Lights that do mislead the morn.  
But my kisses bring again, bring again,  
Seals of love, but sealed in vain, sealed in vain. (4.1.1-6)

Angelo's past is revealed in the first two lines, which depict his falseness to Mariana. Five years before he cast her aside, forswearing their betrothal. Rejecting her love, Angelo seals himself in seeming virtue, suppressing all human feelings. In 1.3 the Duke describes Angelo as "A man of stricture and firm abstinence, . . . [he] scarce confesses / That his blood flows" (12,51-2).

The two middle lines of this song show Angelo's present state, Isabella's effect on him, and his attempt to mislead her. When the virtuous Isabella passionately pleads for her brother's life, Angelo experiences a flood of human desires as his wall of selfcontrol crumbles: "Most dangerous / Is that temptation that doth goad us on / To sin in loving virtue" (2.2.181-3). His encounter with Isabella, like the sun's breaking through the darkness, brings the "break of day," and symbolizes new enlightenment and understanding. The three characters in 4.1 must unite to control and correct Angelo.

The final lines of this song look to the future, when the seals of love will be broken and Angelo will be able to love. This will happen in the last scene, when Angelo's hidden actions are publicly revealed and corrected, and he is reunited with Mariana.

In *Measure for Measure*, the play goes from seeming to reality to truth. At first the characters seem to be thoroughly virtuous. Their seeming virtue, however, must be brought into reality. Only after correcting themselves, can they bring truth and order to their world (Bache, "Measure" 11). In the last scene Mariana observes, "They say best men are molded out of faults, / And, for the most, become much more the better / For being a little bad" (5.1.44-6).



All these characters must leave Vienna to be corrected. The Duke comes to the realization of the effect that his inaction and isolation has had on his people. In Act 1 the Duke is “an o’ergrown lion in a cave, / That goes not out to prey” (1.3.22-3). He is spurred into action in response to Angelo’s lecherous behavior. The Duke leaves his isolation and restores order to his world. As Bache explains, “The characters are corrected and instructed. The movement is toward reality and truth. The characters move into the light and the city gate: roles become proper at the very end” (“Measure” 11). In this way Shakespeare avoids the tragic implications of *Measure for Measure* and, instead, presents a dark and problematical comedy.

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## Unscheduled Lessons: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston

In her 1929 feminist essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes the educational, social, and economic disadvantages women have confronted throughout history in their struggle to survive as writers. Nineteenth century authors such as Jane Austen and Emily Bronte not only lacked a tradition of women writers behind them, but were discouraged and criticized, and only in the rarest of circumstances enjoyed the independent income which allowed them time and space to write without distraction. Woolf argued that to write well women must transcend the anger that often accompanies living in a patriarchal society which subordinates them to men and denies them equal rights. It is amazing, she concludes, that women have ever been able to produce great art (74-76). In all of what Woolf says, it is difficult not to think of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston is one of the most vivid illustrations in American literature of a woman's struggle to survive as an artist, and certainly Woolf would applaud her. In spite of her race, gender, and the Great Depression, Hurston is recorded as one of the two or three collectors of black American folklore of historical importance, the author of the first black feminist novel of the 20th century who published more books than any black woman before her, and the premier female writer of the Harlem Renaissance (Perkins 506). Yet, for all this success, Hurston's story is ultimately tragic. In 1960 Zora Neale Hurston, a resident of the Saint Lucie County welfare home in Fort Pierce, Florida, died alone and in poverty, forgotten as an artist and buried in an unmarked grave (Hemingway 348).

Hurston was born between 1891 and 1907 in Eatonville, Florida, the first black incorporated town in America. After her mother's death and a series of violent encounters with her stepmother, she left home at fourteen, working as a manicurist, maid, and even as wardrobe girl for a Gilbert & Sullivan troupe. She soon settled in Baltimore, where she put herself through high school. Scholarships for her outstanding literary talent supported her university study, and through grants and patrons she was able to continue at the graduate level

and conduct field work and research. Early publications and her vivacious personality drew the attention of key figures in the Harlem Renaissance, and soon Zora was launched on a career as a writer and anthropologist that would result in four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, and more than fifty short stories and essays (4).

The questions that arise are intriguing—and sad. What were the dynamics that led an intelligent, ambitious, and talented individual who had been honored repeatedly in her field to die alone and in poverty? To what extent was her personal and professional downfall traceable to being a black, female writer in a society dominated by white males at best ambivalent about blacks, females, and writers? Was it these external pressures, or, were the beginnings of a bad end within the person herself? It seems everyone who writes about Hurston has a theory as to why her career wasn't more successful. Biographer Hemingway notes that the obscurity in which her life ended had nothing to do with drugs, alcohol, or high living. He instead blames the fact that near the end of her life she had no way to generate income so she could keep on writing (4) and concludes that she had the misfortune to live “in a country that fails to honor its black artists” (7). Alice Walker cites a series of misfortunes that battered her spirit and her health, but like Hemingway, focuses on economics. “Being broke made all the difference,” Walker writes, recalling Woolf's thesis; “Without money of one's own in a capitalist society, there is no such thing as independence” (xvi). And without money and independence, Zora's career and personal life declined to the point where her manuscripts were rejected by publishers and her body lay in a funeral home until funds could be raised to bury her (348).

Money was certainly a problem for Zora, as it was for most artists in the decades before and after the Great Depression. Cash was hard to come by, and Zora was notoriously bad at managing it. But to blame the dismal end of Hurston's story on economics or even on racial prejudice is to oversimplify a complex series of events and the personality of Zora herself. External pressures worked against Hurston, but closer scrutiny reveals that Hurston was at times her own worst enemy. She repeatedly made deliberate choices that sabotaged her career and jeopardized her personal future. A lucky white male might get away with being ambitious, volatile, short-sighted, and insecure, but Hurston's luck ran out when her health failed, and especially in 1948 when a false morals charge nearly destroyed her reputation. The case was dropped, but lurid, front-page coverage by a national black tabloid crushed her spirit and signaled the beginning of the



end of her career. Between 1949 and 1951 she published several articles, but thereafter subsisted on welfare, substitute teaching, and unemployment benefits until her death of hypertensive heart disease (322).

Hindsight, of course, is perfect. It is easy to criticize Hurston's mistakes with the perspective of the thirty-four years since her death. It is easy to see paths that might have led to personal happiness and professional success. Analyzing the specific patterns of behavior Hurston demonstrated is not meant as criticism—she did the best she could, and we all make mistakes in our own lives—but as a way of looking at our own futures. As Alice Walker states in her forward to Hemenway's biography, we must take Zora's life as a "cautionary tale . . . and learn from it what we can" (xvi). The security of women in this society (and most societies) is precarious, and the lessons of Hurston's life can teach all women, regardless of the career they choose.

Ironically, what Hurston probably perceived as the best luck she ever had, turned out to be perhaps one of the most insidious influences in her life. The bad joke would go something like: "Zora, the good news is, a wealthy white socialite is going to subsidize your work for the next five years; the bad news is . . . a wealthy white socialite is going to subsidize your work for the next five years!" Zora's association with Mrs. Osgood Mason, an elderly patron of Negro arts whom Zora referred to as 'Godmother', was only one in a series of relationships that resulted in what may be seen as a crippling reliance on other people's money, a syndrome not unlike our current welfare system that promotes a cycle of dependence that sometimes discourages initiative. Mrs. Mason contributed over \$15,000 to Zora's support between 1927 and 1932 (105), but may have done Zora more harm than good and skewed the direction of her career. Mrs. Mason was demanding and restrictive, encouraging Hurston's field work, but in a series of written contracts preventing her from publishing her findings for profit or using it in drama or fiction (112). Further, one can imagine the bitterness Zora must have felt submitting detailed accounts and having to ingratiate herself to a white woman for her most minor expenditures. It is also notable that while Mrs. Mason did agree to finance Zora's folklore research (which then become the exclusive property of Mrs. Mason), she refused to support Zora's further education—a Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia (132)—something a real godmother might have done to ensure the financial stability and well-being of her ward. After Mrs. Mason's subsidies ended, Zora never held a job that lasted for much more than a year or made enough money to live on. Hurston historian Darwin Turner

describes how this pattern of relying on the generosity of whites began early with the influence of a white man who assisted her birth, and then continued throughout her life. After admiring her elementary school recitation, a group of Northern whites sent her books, second hand clothes, and a hundred pennies. Later, a white patron who had recommended her for a maid's job bought her a dress so that she would look more presentable during an interview (92). When Zora went to New York, novelist and literary contest judge Fannie Hurst hired her as a secretary—even though she was dismal at typing and haphazard at filing—then fired her and kept her on as chauffeur and companion. Annie Nathan Meyer, another prominent novelist and the founder of Barnard College arranged her undergraduate scholarship (Hemingway 21). Additionally, Hurston was supported by a series of research fellowships through Columbia University (Turner 133). Obviously, without some of this assistance, Zora's career would never have gotten off the ground, but at some point, she may have accepted one too many handouts.

A second characteristic that created problems for Hurston was a lack of discipline that pervaded her personal, professional, and academic life. Fannie Hurst recalled that Zora "lived irresponsibly, was habitually late, slept through appointments, and failed to meet obligations" (93). These qualities were evident during her years at Howard University when, between 1919 and 1924 she completed a year and a half of coursework, making A's in courses she liked and F's in courses that didn't interest her (Hemingway 18). Her most serious transgression—one that would have ended her academic career had it been discovered—occurred when, on her initial foray, she discovered that gathering folklore was tiresome, unglamorous, and difficult work. Under pressure to produce a report for her mentor and in the midst of a disintegrating marriage, Hurston blatantly plagiarized the work of an earlier researcher. It never happened again, but never again did she allow herself to be put in such a position. Hemingway speculates that the act may have been an unconscious attempt at academic suicide, given that early in her career Hurston vacillated between the life of the creative artist and the demands of scholarly research. At any rate, the action went undetected until 1972 (97). Later in life, Hurston displayed a pattern of friction with every boss who hired her, especially structured academic types. In January of 1934 she was hired to establish a school of dramatic arts at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida, but the experience was a short-lived disaster. Hemingway writes, "Hurston, who did not submit well to



authority, and was never at ease as an academic, was very soon at odds with Mrs. Bethune." By April Hurston had decided to "abandon the farce . . . and get on with [her] work" (201). A few years later when Zora became an editor for the Federal Writers' Project in Florida, she gained a reputation as "an actress who loved to show off, a woman of remarkable talent and spirit, a loner, an uncooperative co-worker, and editor who hated to stay inside at her desk." Throughout her year and a half on the project, she would frequently disappear for a week or more at a time, telling no one of her whereabouts, only to re-emerge, pick up a paycheck, and disappear again (252). A year later, in 1939, Hurston was hired by North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham, again to organize a drama program, but was soon at odds with the college president who expected faculty members to live on or near campus and observe decorum. Arriving in a bright red convertible, Zora ignored campus housing and rented a cabin in the nearby mountains. She complained about her class schedule, was inconsistent in her teaching, and in the end, never staged a single play, preferring to absorb herself in drama activities outside of school. The depth of her commitment to North Carolina College is evident in a letter to Paul Green of the drama department at Chapel Hill:

You do not need to concern yourself with the situation here at the school. I won't care what happens here or if nothing happens here so long as I can do the bigger thing with you . . . I see no reason why the firm of Green and Hurston should not take charge of the Negro playwrighting [sic] business in America. (256)

The 'bigger thing' was a possible collaboration with Green, the winner of a 1927 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Clearly, Zora's heart was not with academia and the everyday working world.

Zora's ambivalence toward university life and a nine-to-five job illustrate what Hemenway termed her "vocational schizophrenia" (63). From her early days at Barnard she was torn between a career as an anthropologist, researcher, or teacher and the freedom and creativity of life as a Harlem Renaissance artist. This failure to commit prevented her from establishing the solid career base that might have paid the bills between publications and during her old age. Her indecision is not surprising, however, when one recalls that her first brush with fame and the bright lights of Harlem coincided with her anthropological studies at college. She worshipped her instructors and was profoundly influenced by her close association with the foremost folklore authority of the time, Franz Boaz,



along with the other scholars at Columbia. But, she was also being drawn into the fast-paced world of the New York literary elite. Her circle of white admirers during the 1920s included stockbrokers, publishing executives, artists, and editors fascinated with her witty personality and tall tales from Eatonville (27). Hemengway states that, "the type of reportorial precision required of the scientific folklorist bored Hurston" (101). She preferred to use folklore as a basis for her fiction and enjoy the freedom to create, not just report. She was also fascinated with the theater, working as a dramatist and choreographer when time and money allowed, but sometimes at the expense of her primary responsibilities, as the incident at North Carolina College demonstrates.

Another critical error Hurston made was her failure to maintain long-term relationships. Her two brief marriages and the absence of any other sustained intimate personal commitments attest to the fact that she never let men or their support interfere with her career. That she gives so little attention to her marriages in her autobiography (to the point of almost denying their existence) suggests that her personal life always came second to her professional aspirations (308). Obviously, marriage is no prerequisite for success or happiness, but a network of support is. Zora broke ties with her family as well. Her fierce pride kept her from attending a Hurston family reunion when she was broke, and when she suffered a stroke in 1959 and had to apply for welfare, she refused to inform her family or to let friends contact them (347). In her professional life she was consistent in criticizing and eventually alienating nearly everyone who ever helped her. Her eagerness to always speak her mind drew more criticism at the time than praise, and she was famous for firing off nasty letters to anyone who crossed her path. Alain Locke, a Harvard graduate and the first black Rhodes Scholar, was a young philosophy professor when Zora entered Barnard. He was her friend, teacher, and mentor for years, but like others, eventually fell out of favor. In a letter to Langston Hughes, she described him as "intellectually dishonest . . . too eager to autograph all successes . . . afraid to risk an opinion first hand" (131). Hughes himself drew even worse criticism after the notorious *Mule Bone* incident. Although he and Hurston had been intimate friends for years, they became bitter enemies after an argument over a play they had written together. Hurston became angry and jealous over the friendship between Hughes and Louise Thompson, whom she viewed as a personal and artistic rival in the triangle. Thompson, a young intellectual hired by Mrs. Mason as a secretary for Hurston and Hughes, typed the manuscript and occasionally offered suggestions

for improvement. Hurston flew into a rage when she suspected the two were scheming to pirate her play. According to Hughes, by phone or in person, Hurston berated everyone associated with the project, including his own mother (144).

And finally, Hurston was no money manager. What little she made, she spent freely. She once pawned her typewriter to buy groceries, and she was continually scrabbling to make ends meet while she wrote. Darwin Turner recounts an amusing anecdote that illustrates her attitude toward finances:

Zora Neale Hurston once mailed ten dollars to a friend from whom she had borrowed five. Five dollars of the ten, Miss Hurston wrote, were to repay the loan, and the other five were to be given to a mutual friend. Near the end of the letter, she requested her friend also to purchase and send her material which would cost five dollars. The friend dutifully performed both errands and casually attributed the discrepancies to her habitual confusion about money. (134)

Hurston never really cared much about money. When she had it she spent it; when she didn't, she made do. When she was gathering folklore, she traveled as long and as far as her money would take her—to Florida, Jamaica, Haiti, Bermuda, the Honduras—and then turned to something else. She never put down roots, and the only home she ever owned was a old houseboat (Hemingway 5). Describing her as a “wandering minstrel,” Turner notes that from 1912 until her death in 1960 she rarely remained in one locality for longer than three years (189). She never seemed to look long-term, but just for the next adventure around the corner.

These long-range life mistakes, each of which would have been damaging to a man, were together ultimately disastrous for a black woman. Hurston didn't follow the advice that the parents of little girls tend to give (but then, neither do we much of the time), and she suffered for her bad judgment. Her spark may have flickered out at the end, but one wonders if looking back, she wasn't just happy to ride the tail of the comet for awhile. She lived life on her own terms and seemed to have a good share of fun in the bargain. To do that and produce some great and wonderful literature isn't bad for a girl who arrived in New York with no friends, no job, a dollar fifty, and one dress. It's really quite a lot when you think about it, and perhaps these are also lessons we can take from Zora's life.

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## Marriage Made in Hell

**G**eorge and Martha, the middle-aged, brawling spouses in Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* may have downed more liquor and hurled more four-letter words, but the bitterness between them was mild compared to the couple Rebecca West depicts in her short story, "Indissoluble Matrimony." In fact, if West had been writing in the more "liberated" sixties, her George and Evadne could have been Albee's George and Martha. Both couples, after more than a decade of childless marriage are beyond being tired of each other; they are disgusted at the sight of one another. And in both marriages, old wounds fester and erupt in bitter argument and physical violence that climaxes in . . . simply staying together. Writing in 1914, West restrains her characters' anger with a vestige of Victorian civility that Albee forgoes, but their manners are a brittle veneer. In an epiphany that must have shocked West's readers, her characters realize the truth of their relationship:

He saw her as a toad squatting on the clean earth, obscuring the stars and pressing down its hot moist body on the cheerful fields. She felt his long boneless body coiled round the roots of the lovely tree of life. They shivered fastidiously. With an uplifting sense of responsibility they realised that they must kill each other. (1591)

That a woman in 1914 would be so bold in undermining the myth of marital bliss is perhaps one of several reasons West's story has been excluded from a literary canon assembled chiefly by WASP males. Nor did West endear these mainstream male readers by creating a heroine who has "black blood" (1578) and campaigns for the Socialist party. Additionally, West undercuts the ideals of the strong, courageous male and the soft, retiring female: Evadne is too much of a woman, and George is not enough of a man; she is too strong, too sensual, and he is too weak and asexual. Her male "protagonist" is a pathetic, cowardly weakling who fears and detests female power and sexual energy. George Silverton, "a man of irritations, but no passions" (1588), is arguably one of the most misogynistic characters in short fiction.

This hatred of women is particularly blatant early in the story when he remembers a former client in the law firm for which he is a clerk: She was “extraordinarily stupid . . . a marvel of imbecility . . . a mass of darkness” prone to making “idiotic remarks” (1590). He extends this hatred to all women and finds them especially repulsive as they grow older:

She merely presented the loathsome spectacle of an ignorant mind, contorted by the artificial idiocy of coquetry, lack of responsibility and hatred of discipline, stripped naked by old age. (1580)

West clarifies George’s hostility toward women as we learn that he views sex as filth:

The thought of intimacy with some lovely, desirable and necessary wife turned him sick as he sat at his lunch. The secret obscenity of women! He wondered why the Church did not provide a service for the absolution of men after marriage. Wife desertion seemed to him a beautiful return of the tainted body to cleanliness. (1580)

Evadne, of all women, particularly disgusts him. Her murder would “cleanse” his sins of the flesh. Calling her a “depraved, over-sexed creature” (1582), George displays a “madonna/whore” mindset that illustrates his limited vision of both sex and women:

You’ve always been keen on kissing and making love, haven’t you, my precious. At first you startled me, you did! I didn’t know women were like that . . . I don’t believe good women are! (1583-1584)

And finally, George’s hatred of all things feminine culminates in a willingness to sacrifice his own progeny to spite Evadne and deny her that particular female prerogative: “Quite often George had found a mean pleasure in the thought that by never giving Evadne a child he had cheated her out of one form of experience.” (1590)

George’s obsessive misogyny, however, illustrates a central weakness in the story. The reader suspects that Rebecca West was one of those authors Virginia Woolf had in mind when she cautioned that women must transcend their personal grievances to write well (73). Anger seems to have distorted West’s writing here. She is so consistently heavy-handed in making George nasty that he becomes a caricature. Evadne, on the other hand, is shown in a consistently positive light: although voluptuously beautiful and sensual by nature, she is always the efficient wife and homemaker, intent on pleasing her husband, yet



struggling toward self-actualization through political activity. George is simply too despicable. Insecure, cowardly, pompous, and a repressed sexual weakling, he schemes to kill his wife and then glories in her (supposed) death. He doesn't seem real because he is overdrawn, and she doesn't seem real because she is underdrawn.

Part of the difficulty lies in West placing the reader in the mind of George so much of the time and never delving beneath Evadne's surface. We know exactly why George detests her, but we're never quite sure how she feels about him. It seems inconsistent for West's omniscient narrator to illuminate their simultaneous thoughts of killing one another, and then have only George act upon the impulse. He, like the coward he is, punches her full in the stomach and pushes her head under water, but she never retaliates. On the contrary, after George's feeble attempts at both murder and suicide are thwarted, he climbs back into bed with her, and she lovingly accepts him. West ends the story with, "Evadne caressed him with warm arms" (1599). Thus the female, even though she supposedly hates the male as much as he hates her, gets to be the heroine, the nurturing mother-force, while George remains the pathetic, misogynistic villain. West is so intent upon male-bashing, that her characters lose their humanity, and the reader remains unmoved.

In spite of shortcomings in characterization, "Indissoluble Matrimony" is nonetheless a fine piece of literature. As in Kate Chopin's short novel *The Awakening* (the story of another unhappy union), swimming functions as a metaphor for female escape or autonomy. Verbal and situational irony are handled deftly within the story, as well as in the title. In choosing the term "matrimony" over the word "marriage" West alludes to the sacred sacrament of the church and its mandate that "What God hath joined together let no man tear asunder." For George and Evadne, however, marriage is no sacrament; it is war—and the only thing that prevents its dissolution is George's inability to drown Evadne or gas them both in their sleep. West's language, too, is rich and poetic. When the ill-matched pair confronts each other to do battle at the water's edge, precise sensory images bring the landscape to life, mirroring her characters' emotions:

The stars trembled overhead with wrath. A wind from behind the angry crags set the moonlight on [the river] quivering with rage, and the squat hawthorn tree creaked slowly like the irritation of a dull little man. (1590)



Perhaps if West had been a bit more humane with the “dull little man” she creates in *George Silverton*, this would have been a better story, but she goes too far in her negative portrait. As in Albee’s play, by the time the story is over, we are as fed up with these characters as they are with each other. We don’t much care what happens to them, and after all the bickering and sniping, we’re just glad to get them out of our living rooms. In a sort of ironic justice, however, both couples get what they deserve – a lifetime of “indissoluble matrimony.”

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## A Theme Of Duality: Christina Rossetti And “Goblin Market”

According to Katherine J. Mayberry, in *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery*, with the 1893 publication of her book *Verses*, Christina Rossetti was praised as “one of the greatest living poets” and one of “the foremost poets of the age” (11). In later years, Rossetti’s poetry would comprise only a small percentage of the works included in anthologies of English and Victorian poetry (11). However, since the late 1970s, a resurgence of critical interest in Rossetti’s work has occurred (12).

Christina Georgina Rossetti was born in London on December 5, 1830, into an Anglo/Italian family. Rossetti was the youngest of four children. Her sister Maria was the first born, followed by her two brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael. Formally a museum curator, poet, and politician in Naples, Rossetti’s father was forced to emigrate due to revolutionary political activities. He lived in exile in London where he taught Italian and was a Dante scholar. Rossetti’s mother was a former governess. As part of an artistic and intellectual family, the Rossetti children were avid readers whose creativity produced several family journals. Christina’s poetry from her earliest years was included in these journals. All four of the Rossetti children were bilingual. They were fluent in English and Italian and Christina wrote poetry in both languages as well.

Young Christina was raised within a sheltered, family oriented life in London, yet most of the family’s social contacts were with their Italian friends. Her brother William Michael, who was a well known critic and editor, wrote in the introduction to her 1904 *Collected Poems*:

Of English society there was extremely little – barely one or two families that we saw something of at moderate intervals; but of Italian society – in the sense of Italians who hunted up and haunted our father as an old acquaintance or as a celebrity – the stream was constant and copious. . . . There were exiles, patriots, politicians, literary men, musicians, some of them of inferior standing; fleshy and good-natured

Neapolitans, keen Tuscans, emphatic Romans. . . . All of this – even apart from our chiefly Italian blood – made us, no doubt, not a little different from British children in habit of thought and standard of association. (Sisson 12)

The Rossetti children were also raised as strict Anglican Catholics, and Christina's sister Maria became an Anglican nun performing social work for the poor. In 1850, Rossetti broke an engagement of marriage because her fiancé converted to Roman Catholicism. She later rejected another marriage proposal because the man was agnostic. In 1854, at age 24, Rossetti volunteered to serve with Florence Nightingale's expedition of nurses to Scutari in the Crimea, but she was not accepted because of her young age. During 1860-1870, Christina Rossetti performed social work at St. Mary Magdalen Home for Fallen Women on Highgate Hill.

In 1848, Rossetti's brother, Dante Gabriel, a poet and painter, became one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. According to C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature*, this organization began as an artistic movement "to regain the spirit of simple devotion and adherence to nature," as in the Italian religious art before Raphael (374). The emphasis was on truth in nature and a "rejection of all conventions designed to heighten effects artificially" (374). But this movement came to include English literature as well, and their official literary journal was called *The Germ*. Pre-Raphaelite poetry is characterized by: "pictorial elements, symbolism, sensuousness, a tendency to metrical experimentation, attention to minute detail, and interest in the medieval and supernatural" (374). Christina Rossetti, whose poetry was also published in *The Germ*, wrote much sensuous poetry of this kind, and through her contacts with this group of people, she came to know many of the great, or legendary, writers of English Victorian literature. According to Mayberry, some tension existed within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that Christina should not be officially included because she was a woman; (5) but in 1862, with Christina Rossetti's first commercially published volume of poetry, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, the title poem was, according to C. H. Sisson, in *Christina Rossetti: Selected Poems*, "the first Pre-Raphaelite writing to catch public attention" (17). Sisson states that Rossetti thus "stole a march on those flamboyant professionals and became the spearhead of the new poetry of the final third of the century" (17). And Mayberry observes that "she was without question among the most talented poets of the [Pre-Raphaelite] group" (14).



According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, during the 1850s and 1860s, Rossetti had several love affairs (875), yet she became increasingly religious and somber in her later years (876). In 1871, Rossetti developed a severe case of Grave's (hyperthyroid) disease. She became chronically debilitated and suffered severe disfigurement that included protruding eyes, darkened and discolored skin, a coarsening of her features, and the loss of much of her thick hair (Battiscombe 141). At about this same time, Rossetti wrote six volumes of devotional essays that were published by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (Norton 876). In 1894, Christina Rossetti died of cancer. Gilbert and Gubar state:

During the last weeks of her life, a neighbor complained that she could be heard screaming for several hours every evening, and one wonders if such outbursts—which her physician attributed to 'hysteria' rather than pain—might represent some portion of the cost exacted by her long renunciation of desire. (877)

Christina Rossetti's life consisted of many dualities: she was raised Anglo/Italian and was bilingual in both English and Italian; she was raised in London, but among a society of mostly Italian friends; she was both religious and sensuous; she was, by gender, officially excluded from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, yet she was the first among them to publish to acclaim; and she was lusty and passionate, but increasingly pious and restrained. In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers states that "it is, of course, as a Christian poet that Christina Rossetti is best known" (156). Mayberry observes that "Rossetti's devotional verse . . . constitutes almost half of her cannon" (1), but that she was also a "rare phenomenon . . . : a willingly unmarried, professional, successful woman poet in Victorian England" (2). Ford Maddox Ford commented that Rossetti was:

The tranquil Religious . . . undergoing within herself always a fierce struggle between the pagan desire for life, the light of the sun and love, and an asceticism that, in its almost more than Calvinistic restraint, reached also a point of frenzy. (qtd. in Mayberry 18-19)

The totality of all of these dualities in Christina Rossetti's life provides a contest within which "Goblin Market," her most famous lyric poem, can be understood.

Reading "Goblin Market" is like looking through a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors and transforming shapes. This poem is a sort of cautionary tale written like a nursery rhyme, in which Rossetti displays a dazzling artistry of assonance,

alliteration, unpredictable meter, and irregular rhyme. "Goblin Market" is 567 short lines of lyric poetry, and its narrative flows on a swift current of poetic vitality.

Two sisters live near a country glen, where little animal goblin men tramp along the lane seductively exclaiming the fruits they have for sale. The local girls all know to resist this temptation, and Lizzie runs away. But Laura is taken in. Since Laura has no money, the goblins trade their fruit for a lock of her golden hair. After wantonly gobbling down their fruit, Laura returns home in a daze. Lizzie fretfully remembers Jeanie, who ate of the fruit, withered, and died, but Laura triumphantly declares that tomorrow she will buy more. The next day, Laura begins to sicken and fade, desperately craving the fruit, yet no longer able to hear the goblin's seductive cry. Laura's hair has become thin and gray, and she gradually wastes away. She desperately tries to grow a fruit plant from a kernel she saved, but to no avail. As Laura comes ever closer to death, Lizzie approaches the goblins to buy more fruit for her sister, but they insist that she eat of it there with them. Lizzie refuses these terms and demands that her penny be returned, so the goblins physically assault her. She stands firm and clenches her teeth, as the goblins try to force the fruit into her mouth. Finally, they fling back her penny and disappear. Lizzie runs back home, so that Laura can eat of the pulp and juice that has been smashed onto her face and chin, and in bitter, writhing ecstasy, Laura consumes this feast until she falls unconscious. Laura awakes in the morning cured, restored, and young. In years to come, Laura teaches her daughters about the peril of temptation and her sister's loving care.

"Goblin Market" is layered with many levels of meanings. One interpretation can be drawn from the characteristically Victorian literary convention of character doubling. Laura and Lizzie can be seen as bipolar aspects of a single individual. Laura is sensual and indulgent, while Lizzie is judicious and restrained – much like the duality within Christina Rossetti herself. The text of the poem supports this observation:

Golden head by golden head,  
Like two pigeons in one nest  
Folded in each other's wings,  
They lay down in their curtained bed:  
Like two flakes of new-fallen snow,  
Like two wands of ivory  
Tipped with gold for awful kings.

Moon and stars gazed in at them,  
Wind sang to them lullaby,  
Lumbering owls forebore to fly,  
Not a bat flapped to and fro  
Round their nest:  
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast  
Locked together in one nest. (184-198)

.....

For there is no friend like a sister  
In calm or stormy weather;  
To cheer one on the tedious way,  
To fetch one if one goes astray,  
To lift one if one totters down,  
To strengthen whilst on stands. (562-567)

The story of Jeanie suggests the interpretation of character doubling as well:

Do you remember Jeanie,  
How she met them in the moonlight,  
Took their gifts both choice and many  
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers  
Plucked from bowers  
Where summer ripens at all hours?  
But ever in the moonlight  
She pined and pined away;  
Sought them by night and day,  
Found them no more, but dwindled and grew gray;  
Then fell with the first snow,  
While to this day no grass will grow  
Where she lies low:  
I planted daisies there a year ago  
That never blow.

You should not loiter so. (147-162)

Here the text suggests that Jeanie had no balancing force, or no metaphorical “sister,” within her by which she could be redeemed.

The further interpretation that this destructive temptation is sexual is also suggested within the text:

She thought of Jeanie in her grave,



Who should have been a bride;  
But who for joys brides hope to have  
Fell sick and died  
In her prime,  
In earliest winter time,  
With the first glazing rime,  
With the first snowfall of crisp winter time. (312-319)

This passage, in addition to Lizzie's rape-like attack by the goblin men, establishes the clearly sexual nature of this cautionary tale.

In a chapter from *The Madwoman in the Attic*, titled "The Aesthetics of Renunciation," Gilbert and Gubar also posit the interpretation of this theme of Rossetti's renunciation of sexual desire. However, Gilbert and Gubar draw the conclusion that, as a female Victorian writer, Rossetti is struggling with issues of "societal constraints" (564) through which she is equating the dangers of the fulfillment of sexual desire with the creation of poetic art and attempting to renounce them both (569-570). Gilbert and Gubar cite the examples of both Jeanie, who withered and died and rendered the earth infertile, and Laura, who was unable to make the kernel grow. From these two examples, Gilbert and Gubar infer Rossetti's belief that, as a woman, indulgence in the fruits of either sensual or artistic desire irrevocably shrivels the soul (569-579). Thus, according to Gilbert and Gubar, Rossetti reveals that "like Laura and Jeanie, [she] must learn to suffer and renounce the self-gratifications of art and sensuality" (570-571). However, one need not agree with this conclusion. One can argue that, by these same two examples of character doubling, Rossetti is conveying the belief that it is only through the renunciation of sensual desire that artistic creation is able to grow. Jeanie, who had no double, died unredeemed, and the earth above her was barren and scourged. Laura was redeemed by the negation, or renunciation, of her indulgent act by her sister, and the presence of Laura's children at the end of the poem is the evidence of fertility, or creativity, restored.

In addition to the character doubling within the narrative of this poem, Rossetti also employs what can be called a method of supportive doubling within the text of the poem itself. These dual features include the use of opposites, repetition, and listed pairing, in addition to the poetic conventions of assonance, alliteration, and irregular rhyme. Examples of all of these techniques can be found within the goblin's opening song:

Morning and evening  
 Maids hear the goblins cry:  
 "Come buy our orchard fruits,  
 Come buy, come buy:  
 Apples and quinces,  
 Lemons and oranges,  
 Plump unpecked cherries,  
 Melons and raspberries,  
 Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,  
 Swart-headed mulberries,  
 Wild free-born cranberries,  
 Crabapples, dewberries,  
 Pineapples, blackberries,  
 Apricots, strawberries;—  
 All ripe together  
 In summer weather,—  
 Morns that pass by,  
 Fair eyes that fly,  
 Come buy, come buy:  
 Our grapes fresh from the vine,  
 Pomegranates full and fine,  
 Dates and sharp bullaces,  
 Rare pears and greengages,  
 Damsons and bilberries,  
 Taste them and try:  
 Currents and gooseberries,  
 Bright-fire-like barberries,  
 Figs to fill your mouth,  
 Citrons from the South,  
 Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;  
 Come buy, come buy. (1-31)

The doubling of "Morning and evening" (1) establishes opposites, while "Come buy, come buy" (4, 19, 31) sets in a repetition. "Dates and sharp bullaces,/ Rare pears and greengages,/ Damsons and bilberries,/ Taste them and try" (22-25) creates a listed pairing within each line, and "Our grapes fresh from the

vine,/ Pomegranates full and fine" (20-21) creates a listed pairing between lines. "Figs to fill your mouth. Citrons from the South" (28-29) demonstrates the poetic doubling of assonance, alliteration and rhyme.

Mayberry observes:

... in "Goblin Market," Rossetti has called upon her talents as a writer of nursery rhymes and children's verse to produce a delightfully hypnotic metrical effect, (88) [and] permeating the verse is a sense of the poet's breathless inebriation with the process of writing; (90) . . . in short, the style of the majority of the poem represents all that is hedonistic, intoxicating, and irresponsible in the writing process – all that comes most easily to the poet. (91)

Hence, apropos to the theme of duality within Christina Rossetti's life and work, the apparent paradox of both this poem and its writer is that this cautionary tale, which warns of the dangers of indulging in sensuality, is in itself a sensual revel.

To be sure, not all of the poem is composed in this dense a style, but it is primarily in the passages relating to the goblin men that Rossetti entices the reader to follow along:

One hauls a basket,  
One hauls a plate,  
One lugs a golden dish  
Of many pounds weight. (54-59)

.....

One had a cat's face,  
One whisked a tail,  
One tramped at a rat's pace,  
One crawled like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry scurry. (71-76)

And so it is, through all of these aspects of character doubling, supportive doubling, and the doubling of poetic conventions, that Rossetti reinforces the overall sense of seduction and duality that are explored within this poem.

Christina Rossetti has been referred to as both "a nun of art" (Norton 873) and "a playful saint" (877). In "Goblin Market," Rossetti is proclaiming her choice between the warring aspects of her inner duality; for she herself is



celebrating the pleasure of the artistic fruits of her self-imposed renunciation, as she, along with her mischievous little goblin men, alluringly chant, "Come buy, come buy."

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## Edith Wharton: The Writer

**T**o understand Edith Wharton, the writer, it is important to understand the political and social climate of her time. Her fiction was written over more than three decades of the most significant upheaval and change involving the issue of freedom for women.

The "Woman Movement" (as it was called in Wharton's time) picked up widespread support between the 1890s and the end of World War I. The mood showed itself politically in suffrage campaigns and the subsequent passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Socially it was the beginning of the end of the taboo against a respectable woman's earning her own living.

Wharton was not among the activists. She was not a person to join with any group of people working toward a social goal, much less to get out and campaign or march around (Ammons 2). "She was no rebel, but was fascinated by rebellion" (Howe 2).

Edith Wharton viewed the typical American woman as not being free to control her own life. In her opinion a woman was far from being a whole human being, even though there was enthusiasm and optimism about the "Woman Movement". A woman was now able to work, marry whom she pleased or divorce if she chose; she could even swim or smoke cigarettes if she were quite daring. To Edith Wharton, however, a woman was still either isolated, powerless or confined in a marriage. She thought there was especially loneliness for the intellectual woman.

She saw the disparity between a man's expectations of a woman and a woman's expectation of herself. She thought men were afraid of strong women and did not want mates who were their equals. They wanted wives less intelligent and less sophisticated than themselves. Wharton may have been generalizing from her own impressions from the reactions to herself. She was a brilliant woman who could scare the men she met, and for that matter, many of the women also (Ammons 2).

To be a serious female author in the 1890s was to be a writer of stories about women and their demands. Edith Wharton focused on the pain of being a

woman. As for demands, she believed rebellion almost always met with failure.

In the 1890s she was confused and unhappy with her own life. Her fiction also, was often confused and angry. The women she wrote about were in lives they detested. These women were involved with deceit, entrapment, defamation, murder, and betrayal. She wrote about women from widely different economic and social stations. The villain almost always was a man.

In 1902, *The Valley of Decision* launched her career as a novelist (Ammons 17). Although *The Valley of Decision* is a rather boring novel, it was extremely important in Wharton's development as a writer. It is a long historical novel about the French Revolution which required disciplined research and analysis. Wharton had to work at understanding the values and hidden mechanisms of the world she fictionalized. Throughout her career she would examine social institutions and power structures to see how they affected people, especially women.

Edith Wharton finally enjoyed her first complete success with *The House of Mirth* in 1905. The reviewers universally praised her graceful, fluent style as subtle and seductive. One reviewer stated the book would give "Wharton's name a place in the history of American literature" (Joslin 130).

The clash between material goals and higher values are found throughout her major novels, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and in later, lesser known novels, *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) and *The Children* (1928).

A recurring theme in Wharton's books is a woman who is vital, brave, and more receptive to all of life rather than to the society which she must confront and challenge. "The image of a questioning woman confronting a hostile world permeates her novels" (Wershoven 16). This woman is in some way outside of her society, different from other women, whether because of her background or her lack of social status, or because she has violated some social taboo.

Depending on the novel, the character functions in all or several of the following ways:

- 1) Her presence forces another, usually a male, to re-examine his world, which often results in shattering his complacency.
- 2) Placed in contrast to the other women in the novel, the protagonist's way of life often shows how trapped and suffocated women are.
- 3) She may show an unhappy person alternative ways to live, however, he rejects these because he, too, is trapped and afraid to change.



- 4) She exposes the false values of society regarding tradition and prejudice.
- 5) She forces the reader to judge society on her terms.
- 6) Finally, and perhaps most importantly the woman embodies and develops values that Wharton approves of. (Wershoven 14)

The societies that Wharton writes about are ones in which money is the supreme good, the source of power. The power which, for a woman, can only be accessed through association with a male; a father, a lover, or a husband. The woman who lives within society remains dependent upon a male as protector and provider, living an extremely limited life, in other words, trapped. Some of Wharton's characters manage to find a certain satisfaction within the trap. Some of them escape their entrapment by simply leaving, others avoid it altogether by failing to become the standard marriageable product. One of her characters lacked a dowry and was not interested in playing the "marriage game". Some are in extreme poverty and others are "too intelligent or too masculine in their interests and abilities, to fit into the female role." (Wershoven 20)

These women become outsiders, and begin to form their own values and to act and to grow independently. Inevitably she becomes a symbol of what her society cannot accept, and a danger to those within it.

Wharton is critical of many human qualities, including materialism, repression, intolerance, and the refusal to face unpleasant reality or pain. The values she believes in, which are usually embodied in her "outsider" characters, are compassion, open and spontaneous expression of emotion, the courage to face reality and reception to whatever life offers, and a sense of self not solely defined by society. She feels free to express anger or defiance. She takes a fearless stance before a hostile world, assuming an active, rather than a passive role in life, becoming more and more herself and less a model of the feminine ideal. The endless struggle for a sense of self that threatens an intolerant society is a struggle Edith Wharton understood well. The pattern of Wharton's life parallels the conflicts she wrote of so frequently in her novels. She lived with the same pain, rejection and isolation which provided her with a special identification with those female characters who suffer and grow as she did.

Her novels, especially *The House of Mirth*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Ethan Frome*, *Summer*, and *The Age of Innocence* stress the bonds put upon the individuals by the social group. The characters must learn to interpret meanings and values of their culture in order to make personal adjustments between

individual desire and social necessity. In spite of their attempts, they are often confused by messages they are either unable or unwilling to read and interpret clearly. In each case they measure their individualism against social rules and, in the end, go along with the ways of society:

Lily Bart refuses to marry for money in order to secure a stable place in New York society; Ethan Frome longs to escape the ramshackle house bequeathed to him by his parents; Charity Royall makes a temporary home for herself in the Berkshire Woods rather than accept without a struggle the house offered by her step-father; Newland Archer hopes to abandon both house and wife in New York to flee to an imaginary world with Ellen Olenska; even the cruelly successful Undine Spragg continually looks for more exquisite quarters. (Joslin 37)

Her heroes and heroines all struggle to find acceptable, secure places within their social order. The most frightening fate for a Wharton character is to find himself on the outside of society (Joslin 36). They seek ways to find teachers to school them in the manners, nuances and skills required for them to blend into the community. Yet Wharton does not tell the story of those who seek and find, rather her intensely ironic novels focus on the lives of the malcontents, those somehow at odds with society.

Her characters, as hard as they may try to rebel or escape, all learn that life is a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old traditions, old beliefs. Their main conflict is between personal desire and social necessity. The act of freeing oneself from that bond is difficult, if not impossible in her fiction. She denies her characters romantic, illusory, or idealistic escape. Survival for her characters depends on their ability to compromise, to find a way to fit into the larger, more powerful community.

This cool objective way of writing was always criticized by her readers, critics and friends (Joslin 38). The tone in her writing was developed early in her life by her enjoyment of reading scientific studies by Charles E. Darwin and others. She shared their views on the shaping force of biology and environment. She believed that cultural, economic, geographical, climatic and at times, biological issues exert great force over human will (Joslin 40).

Wharton is considered a formal writer. She does not tempt a reader into "feeling he is in the world of the novel, instead she wishes him to be aware of her firm guiding hand, to regard it as a force of assurance and control" (Howe



3). Her locale and subject matter are usually American and the time period is pretty much confined to the late nineteenth century. She was easily bored with the conventional style of writing and continually sought new variations of tone and theme.

Wharton criticized Americans for hiding from life behind their infantile pleasures. She considered money and the relentless pursuit of pleasure as dangerous. She said conflict, tragedy and pain are terrifying to Americans. They want "a tragedy with a happy ending" (Wershoven 15). Wharton preferred the risk of conflict and pain to the boring life of evasion. Her fiction, full of these challenges is a continuing attempt to awaken her society from its complacent slumber (Wershoven 15). Her reluctance to allow a happy ending has become one of the most controversial characteristics of her fiction.

The point for Wharton was not that life is too difficult to deal with, but that mature individuals see the adventure for what it is, full of imperfections and entanglements (Joslin 36). Wharton satirized the public's evasion from life's complexities and conflicts. She stated, "No nation can have grown up ideas till it has a ruling caste of grown up men and women . . . and it is possible to have a ruling caste of grown up men and women only in a civilization (*sic*) where the power of each sex is balanced by that of the other" (Wershoven 20).

She spent much of her life in Europe and identified with the European intellectual thought that fixes the individual in a social, cultural, and historical context as opposed to the romantic self-hood of American Colonial thought that places the individual outside society (Joslin 40). Americans loved the romanticism of the Western Movement.

Edith Wharton was the best social historian of her day. She makes a study of the phenomenon of marriage in turn-of-the-century America, where the male barter to own a female and the female negotiates to secure a male. It is significant that she is the only American novelist who has dealt successfully and at length with old New York society which was still in existence at the turn of the century (Nevius 8).

Society in Edith Wharton's old New York was "sophisticated and provincial, where scandal was more dreaded than disease" (Howe 12). Its refinement was a veneer; conversation was merely gossip. Everyone conformed to convention and had very little intellectual stimulation.

Mrs. Wharton wrote about her segment of America with an authority few novelists could surpass, for she was one of only two or three who knew from the



inside, what the life of the rich in this country was really like (Howe 12). In her later books she exposed her society, revealing not only surface manners, but the layers that her society had trained her to conceal. She knew what it meant, both as privilege and burden, to grow up in a family of the established rich.

She proved to be the American novelist least merciful in her treatment of the rich. Of course, the rich of old New York were not kind to authors either. They considered "authorship as something between a black art and a form of manual labor" (Joslin 3). As with so many writers who were educated during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Wharton felt they were living in an age when energies had run down, meanings collapsed. She felt that somehow the world had hardened and turned cold, and she could not distance herself from it.

In spite of her recognized genius as a writer, Wharton met with considerable negative criticism. The biggest complaint during and after her lifetime was with her pessimism. Her portraits of individuals entangled in a social net of customs, manners, and culture produced unhappy endings, more often than not. One reviewer, upon reading *Ethan Frome*, wrote that he "hoped when Mrs. Wharton writes again she will bring her great talent to bear on normal people and situations" (Joslin 132).

In the 1970s female critics viewed Wharton's novels as being feminist because they "explored the aspirations and deprivations of women in a male-dominated society" (Joslin 132). Their argument was that Edith Wharton was not cruel to her female characters, she was simply depicting with accuracy the lives of women in her time.

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## The Alchemical Guides in 'Female Orations'

In "Female Orations," Margaret Cavendish presents women with a series of seven orations which at first appear to discuss the contradictory complexities of women's lives. Although these seven orations originally appear to be seven separate and contradictory texts, they can be seen as part of one metaphysical sequence, influenced by spiritual alchemy and created to make the thoughtful reader a seeker of the truth.

In *A Handbook to Literature*, Holman describes metaphysical poetry as "intellectual, analytical, psychological, disillusioning, bold; absorbed in thoughts of death, physical love, [and] religious devotion" (289). "Female Orations" can be seen to fit this metaphysical pattern, considering that it begins with a basic premise that "we (women) live like bats or owls, labour like beasts, and die like worms" and moves from here to examine the way out of this "labyrinth" through successive analytical discussions of the faults of the previous oration and presentations of the next step in the analytical process. While each argument at first sounds true and logical, it is immediately shown as a disillusionment by the following argument. The images of death and physical love appear in Cavendish's references to women being buried in men's "houses or beds, as in a grave" (I). Religious devotion can be seen in Oration II with the introduction of spiritual terms such as "praise," "adore," "worship," "goddess" and "devils" and in Oration V where she suggests that women "be acceptable and pleasing to God and men." This religious theme continues through Oration VI with comparisons of terrestrial and celestial beings and is also seen at the end of Oration VII with references to saints and goddesses.

To realize the connection to alchemy, the reader needs to be aware of the spiritual nature of alchemy. According to Petrus Bonus, alchemy was "revealed by God, not for man's material comfort, but for his spiritual well-being" (Coudert 81). Although alchemy was best known in the earliest centuries for attempting to change base metals into gold, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when



Margaret Cavendish wrote "Female Orations," spiritual alchemy was at its high point. (Coudert 83)

The most obvious allusion to alchemy can be seen in the seven step transcendence of symbols used to discuss women throughout the orations. Women are first discussed in terms of bats, owls, beasts and worms (I), then they are discussed as persons (III), and in the end they are referred to as goddesses (VII). The fact that Cavendish's transcendence takes seven steps is significant since alchemy held that seven steps of purification were required in order for the philosopher's stone to be formed (Biedermann 6). The formation of the philosopher's stone was fundamental to the alchemist because it was the transforming agent used in mutating base matter into gold (Seligmann 94).

Cavendish's mention of the philosopher's stone can be seen in Oration V with the reference to the hermaphrodite. Hermaphrodite is another name given to the philosopher's stone, since it is seen as an androgynous combination of the two basic alchemical minerals of sulphur and mercury (Coudert 25). In alchemy, sulphur was associated with the male aspect and mercury was associated with the female aspect (Coudert 29). When seen as the male and female aspects, these two minerals permeate Cavendish's orations. In both alchemy and "Female Orations," the male aspect is considered the active participant, while the female aspect is considered as the passive partner (III). The philosopher's stone was believed to be produced by the loving union of salt (philosophy), sulphur (male), and mercury (female) (Coudert 25). It was considered "the father of all perfection" but only if it was fixed in the alchemical fire so that it could not vanish (Coudert 29).

Fire was one of four elements, including water, air, and earth, that were key to the alchemical process. It was believed that Adam and all prime matter were composed of varying proportions of these elements (Coudert 19). These elements are also represented in "Female Orations." Fire can be seen in Oration IV with the discussion of trials and again in Oration VII with the references to "smiths' forges or chemists furnaces." Interestingly, the hermaphrodite (philosopher's stone) appears between these two in Oration V. Of the four elements, fire, the fixative, was the only one considered to be male (Coudert 29). The element of water can be seen in Oration II when Cavendish talks about women's tears, which are a combination of salt and water. Air is also represented in Oration II with the mention of women's words as "empty sounds" and women's sighs as "puffs of wind." Both elements of air and earth can be seen in

Oration VI with the comparisons of terrestrial (earthly) creatures and celestial (heavenly) deities.

Thus, all the ingredients necessary for transmutation to a golden state (the four elements, the minerals of prime matter, and the philosopher's stone) are contained in Margaret Cavendish's "Female Orations." When the vessel of the human person (woman) is added, the only ingredient lacking is the action of performing the transmutation according to the step-by-step process.

The actual performance of the process was governed by a set of precepts credited to Hermes and engraved on the *Emerald Tablet*. The first precept states, "speak not fictitious things, but that which is certain and true" (Coudert 28). Cavendish ends Oration I with "The truth is," followed by a digression from the truth of the state of women's existence to Oration VII which presents a fantasy world where men "will deliver to our [women's] disposals their power, persons, and lives, enslaving themselves to our will and pleasures." In light of the first precept which demands truth, it then behooves the reader to reread "Female Orations" with a more critical eye to seek out the truth.

In Oration I, Margaret Cavendish states that her purpose for assembling "ladies, gentlewomen, and other inferior women" is to "persuade [them] to make frequent assemblies, associations, and combinations amongst [their] sex, that [they] may unite in prudent counsels, to make [them]selves as free, happy, and famous as men." This is in direct opposition to her later statement in the same oration stating that men "will not suffer us freely to associate amongst our own sex." This immediately sets up a tone of covert activity. From here she sets up a series of contrasts in Oration I between the men's position and the women's. To the men's lives are attributed happiness, and "all the ease, rest, pleasure, wealth, power, and fame." To the women's lives are attributed misery, restlessness, pain, melancholy, powerlessness and oblivion. The attributes are posited in pairs of opposites (ie. happiness, misery; ease, pain; rest, restlessness; pleasure, melancholy; power, powerlessness; and fame, oblivion) with the exception of wealth which is left empty on the women's side of the list. This gap in the pairing, subtle as it is, casts a revealing light on women's financial dependence on men in this patriarchal society. This forced financial bond is further highlighted when women's lives are discussed in terms of slavery with the statements that "they endeavor to bar us of all sorts of liberty, will not suffer us to associate freely . . . ," and that men are unconscionable when women's lives consist of "labour(ing) like beasts" instead of living like human beings. The reference to



women living “like bats or owls,” which are creatures of the night, buried in men’s beds, enlarges the bond of financial dependency to include the intimacy of the bedroom. The final allusion to women dying “like worms” suggests that women live like one of the lowest forms of life, and that their lives are lived underground without light which would allow them to grow to a state of full maturity.

In this first oration then, Margaret Cavendish has set forth the cultural situation of women’s lives in its most base form through the use of heated language. The alchemical significance here lies in the alchemical steps of transmutation. According to J. E. Cirlot in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, the steps in the alchemical process are calcination, putrefication, solution, distillation, conjunction, sublimation, and philosophic congelation (6). Cavendish has performed the first step, calcination, which is the process of subjecting any infusible substance to a roasting heat in order to reduce it to its basest or primary form.

Oration II is introduced by giving Oration I the credit for stating the problem wisely and eloquently, but takes the reader a step further by pointing out that Oration I states the situation but not any solution. Here Cavendish suggests that the woman who could lead other women out of “the labyrinth men have put us into” should be treated as a goddess. “Alchemists cast themselves in the role of saviours who redeemed base compounds by purifying and spiritualizing them (Coudert 135). As the author of the orations, Cavendish may, therefore, see herself as this goddess attempting to spiritualize women’s base existence through her transforming alchemical orations.

While Oration I discusses the situation in positive terms for men and negative terms for women, Oration II discusses the solution in positive spiritual terms for women but negative spiritual terms for men. The goddess of the solution is described as potentially worthy of praise, admiration, adoration and worship; yet, men are described as “tyrants” and “devils,” who “keep us in the hell of subjection.” The introduction of these spiritual terms while suggesting the need for a solution implies that the solution will have a spiritual context. At this point, Cavendish takes on an unexpected change in tone and digresses into an attitude of hopelessness that says, “I cannot perceive any redemption or getting out.” The empty options suggested are “complain[ing], and bewail[ing] our condition,” or “murmur(ing) and rail(ing) against men. In human terms, it is not unusual to see these attitudes of helplessness and hopelessness surfacing at



the initial stage of seeking solutions to complex problems. Unfortunately, many people will reach this stage of problem solving and stop, believing that the answer is beyond them.

Cavendish seems on the surface to suggest these passive, base options to women by saying that “our words to men are as empty sounds; our sighs, as puffs of winds; and our tears, as fruitless showers; and our power is so inconsiderable, that men laugh at our weakness.” But of course if this were the goddess’s answer there would be no reason for the other orations. Here Cavendish can be seen working the second step in the alchemical process, putrification, which is dependent on the decomposition of the base matter (complaining, bewailing, murmuring, and railing). Cavendish suggests that these types of reactions, so often considered as feminine’s traits, are not the solution.

Again, Cavendish is challenging the thoughtful active reader to think more deeply about what is being suggested. If men will “regard not what we say,” then perhaps men will not read too deeply what follows. Since it was written by a woman to other women about women’s lives, men will consider it unworthy of their attention. Cavendish’s statement concerning the discounting of women’s writing is echoed by Anne Bradstreet’s in “The Prologue,” when she states, “If what I do prove well, it won’t advance,/ They’ll say it’s stolen, or else it was by chance.” But Margaret Cavendish may really be using some men’s superior attitude as a weakness against them and as a way to communicate secretly to other women. Men and women who read her orations only at the surface level will miss the doubleness of the deeper meaning that is layered in the orations. This practice of duplicity was well known to the alchemist; because many of the alchemical teachings conflicted with the orthodox church, alchemical writings and works were often forbidden and severely punished. In response to the persecution, alchemists employed the use of “obscurity [in] its literature and symbolism, which could always be explained away as harmless, if misplaced, allegory” (Coudert 106). From this point on, the orations take on double meanings. One meaning on the surface will lead the unquestioning reader to accept what men have been telling women about their situation all along – that there really is no problem for women, they already live pampered lives like goddesses. The other will challenge women to look at the truth of that subtle argument that oppresses women into passivity and to come up with another solution.

In the surface reading of Oration III, women are told that they have “no reason to speak against men.” This is followed by a lengthy list of all the things that men do for women. Men are said to “admire our beauties, . . . love our persons, . . . protect us from injuries, defend us from dangers, (be) industrious for our subsistence, and provide for our children.” This is quite a list of noble activities, and any woman who accepts this as truth in her life would have little reason to complain. But it is prudent to look closely at what it is that men are admiring and loving. They “admire our beauties” and “love our persons.” “Persons” and “beauties” refers to the physical being, not necessarily the inner being. The remainder of that list also refers to physical concerns against injuries and for subsistence. Also, the children are seen as belonging to the women, not to both parents equally. With this in view, women are still seen as the bodies buried in “houses and beds” from Oration I; yet, the situation of financial dependence is now coached in lofty, noble terms of patriarchy that show women who complain to be “as ungrateful as inconstant.”

Oration III continues with a listing of men’s occupations with the claim that these are all engaged in by men for the benefit of women “all which, we [women] could not do ourselves.” But in making the associations and comparisons suggested in the first oration, women must ask, “if men engage in all of their occupations solely for the benefit of women, then why do women ‘labour like beasts’ and ‘die in oblivion’ while men ‘possess all the ease, rest, pleasure, wealth, power, and fame?’” This argument against women’s “empty sounds” continues by suggesting that women have more reason to “murmur against Nature than against men.” It is questionable that a spiritual alchemist would truly suggest that women murmur against “Nature” with a capital “N,” which would be tantamount to blaming God for the cultural situation created by social patriarchy. It is even more unlikely that Margaret Cavendish believes her statement that “women are witless and strengthless, and unprofitable creatures, did they not bear children” since her biographical sketch in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* states that “the childless duchess pursued her literary career with diligence” (72). Rather, Cavendish is working the third alchemical step of the solution which is the act of breaking up or separating. She is separating the fallacy of what patriarchy tells women about their abilities from the true reality of women’s capabilities. She is also sorting out the responsibility for the situation between men who perpetuate women’s limitations, women who accept the limitations and Nature/God. If Cavendish is carrying through her theme of saying the opposite



of what she means in Oration III, then it is not Nature/God that has made women “the most miserable creatures that Nature hath made or could make,” but it is the patriarchal roles of the society and women’s passive acceptance of those roles.

The opening criticism in Oration IV supports the fact that Cavendish does not believe that Nature made women “witless and strengthless” but that it is the result of women’s “neglect(ing) the one and mak(ing) no use of the other, for strength is increased by exercise, and wit is lost for want of conversation.” Cavendish, therefore, advises women to “imitate men; so . . . our bodies and minds appear more masculine.” Here the reader should remember that in alchemy the masculine sulphur was considered the active ingredient, while the feminine mercury was considered the passive ingredient. Thus, Cavendish may be suggesting that women become more active in their own lives so that their “power will increase by [their] actions.”

Just as she addresses her oration to “noble ladies, gentlewomen, and other inferior women,” a variety of social levels, she also suggests that they exercise themselves at their varying social levels” – camps, courts, and cities; in schools, colleges, and courts of judicature; in taverns, brothels, and gaming houses.” In other words, Cavendish is not addressing just the privileged few, but rather she believes that women at all levels of life should exercise their abilities in order to “make our strength and wit known, both to men and to our own selves.” The fourth alchemical step is distillation, the process of extracting the impurities and gleaning the proof or pure element. In testing their abilities by putting themselves “to the proof,” women can extract the fallacy of their limitations and gain the inner strength of confidence that comes from knowing their capabilities. This stage is also representative of the alchemist’s fire that heats the sulphur and mercury making them malleable before attempting to join them in the production of the philosopher’s stone.

The opening of Oration V reaffirms that the purpose of Oration IV was to persuade women to change the custom or behavior of their sex and activity which will be considered “a strange and unwise persuasion” in a patriarchal society. She is further emphasizing that the statement in Oration IV that “we should imitate men; so (that) our bodies and minds appear more masculine” was not intended to suggest that women physically try to become men, which would be a “preposterous and unnatural” attempt to alter nature. Cavendish is advising that to misconstrue her suggestion for an inner spiritual change into a physical change



would result in an attempt to become "corrupt and imperfect creatures," "neither perfect women, nor perfect men." Yet, the introduction of the hermaphrodite in the fifth oration is important to the alchemical process since the fifth step involves the conjunction or marriage of the active, male element of sulphur and the passive, female element of mercury. It is as a result of this step that the philosopher's stone, also called a hermaphrodite, is produced. Cavendish goes on to persuade the reader that what needs to be melded is women's passive social roles with active spirituality. She asks women to "rule" their "lives and behaviors" in a way that is "acceptable and pleasing to God and men." She follows this with a list of moral virtues very similar to those found in alchemical writings. "The alchemists stressed the moral requirements of their art . . . . The author of *Aurora Consurgens* insisted that the alchemist must be healthy, humble, holy, chaste, virtuous, faithful, hopeful, charitable, good, patient, temperate, understanding and obedient" (Coudert 84). Cavendish likewise suggests a similar list of moral characteristics in order to "love in this world and glory in the next." It would seem, therefore, that Cavendish is suggesting the union of women's previously passive lives with an active moral character. One of the purposes of the philosopher's stone was to "draw the individual beyond the everyday world of multiplicity to the transcendent point of origin where plurality vanishes in God" (Coudert 132). Cavendish draws the reader toward this point in Oration VI.

Having used the hemaphroditical philosopher's stone to draw the reader beyond the everyday world of multiplicity, Cavendish addresses the sixth oration only to "worthy women." The significance in that salutation is that the transforming secrets of the alchemical process were revealed only to those deemed worthy (Seligmann 102). The implication of the word worthy then is that those who have actively attained the moral characteristics of Oration V are now ready to move forward to the next step, the point where plurality vanishes in God.

In Oration VI, Cavendish continues this discussion of women's imitation of men in "their action and behavior" while playing with men's insistence that they rank higher on the spiritual scale than women. Cavendish points out that, according to this patriarchal scale, it is no more a "reproach and disgrace" for women to imitate men, than it is a "reproach, disgrace and unnatural (activity) to imitate the gods" which we are "commanded both by the gods and their ministers" to do. Cavendish further makes the point that "since all terrestrial imitations ought to ascend to the better and not to descend to the worse, women

ought to imitate men, as being a degree in nature more perfect." In alchemy, "gold, (the alchemist goal, and) the perfect metal, (was) represented by a circle because a circle symbolized perfection" (Coudert 113). If we apply these symbols to Cavendish's suggestion that women ascend to the better/perfection, then the "degree in nature" that men surpass women is a mere  $1/360$  of the circle. Cavendish's conclusion of Oration VI states, "all masculine (active) women ought to be . . . praised" because this "advances toward perfection" so that "by our industry, we may come, at last, to equal men, both in perfection and power." Of course for the spiritual alchemist this is spiritual perfection and spiritual power. This would represent the sixth alchemical step of sublimation which is aspiring to something higher, purer, or more sublime.

In Oration VII Cavendish asks why women should "desire to be masculine, since our own sex and condition is far the better." Again a surface reading implies that women's lives are superior to men's since Cavendish proposes that "if men have more courage, they have more danger; if men have more strength, they have more labour than women have; if men are more eloquent in speech, women are more harmonious in voice; if men be more active, women are more graceful; if men have more liberty, women have more safety." Yet, notice that all of these propositions are begun with the conditional "if." What is proposed is a list of idealistic traits ascribed to the male and female roles, but not necessarily the reality of truth. Cavendish's list of conditional ifs is dependent on the truth of her list of assertions that would seem to belie the reality of the if statements. Cavendish states that women "never fight duels nor battles." Yet, Joan of Arc fought and won battles two hundred years before Cavendish wrote this statement. She further states, "nor do we go long travels or dangerous voyages." However, the writings of Anne Bradstreet and Mrs. Mary Rowlandson testify to the fact that women traveled across the Atlantic and faced numerous dangers (Gilbert 58, 83). Although formal university studies on the same level to which men were privileged were generally denied to women, it is obvious from the writings of Cavendish and her female contemporaries that some women did spend time on "scholastical studies, questions, and disputes." These exceptions to Cavendish's list are enough to dispute the reality of her list of ifs.

While Cavendish points out that participation in these activities will spoil the beauty, lovely features, and youth of the women who are admired and loved in Oration II, they will also cure the witlessness and strengthlessness of the women in Oration IV. Further consequences of women operating "smiths' forges



and chemists' furnaces, and hundreds of other actions which men (were) employed in" could result in the destruction of "their tender lives" as evidenced by the witch hunts of that period. Yet, Cavendish is right in pointing out that women "have no reason to complain against Nature or the god of Nature" for the physical gifts given to women. The orations have shown that the misuse of these gifts is the result of social roles not edicts of God. A rebuttal to the claim that "men are forced to admire us, love us, and be desirous of us" can be found in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge to Her Husband" (Gilbert 122).

In concluding her orations, Cavendish asks the question, "what can we desire more than to be men's tyrants, destinies, and goddesses?" If the female reader has reached this point without questioning the surface reading of the seven orations, then she may believe herself to be living the life of a goddess already, and her answer would probably be "nothing." Yet, the woman who finds discrepancies between what is said idealistically on the surface and what is found realistically in her life will be challenged to come up with her own answer. Cavendish has generously supplied some guides within the labyrinth of her writing. These guidelines involve seeking the truth, taking an active role in life, gaining self knowledge through life's trials, ruling behaviors with moral character, reaching for the spiritual sublime, fighting life's battles, and gaining knowledge along the way. A woman who applies these guidelines to the solution will then be completing the final step in the alchemical process, the philosophic congelation, which results in the transmutation of the individual into a golden, perfected spiritual state.

The period in history during which "Female Orations" was written and spiritual alchemy was at its height saw the breakdown of orthodox religion and social organization (Coudert 83). This can be seen as a parallel to the present state of society; women are still struggling with their need to establish a fulfilling foothold in society. This parallel makes "Female Orations" just as relevant a writing today as it was 300 years ago, causing a reflective reader to wonder about the parallels of religious thought between spiritual alchemy and the present "new age" phenomena. The resurgence of alchemical thought can be seen in a recent book by Marianne Williamson titled *Illuminata* in which she writes, "The ways of worship, of genuine spiritual devotion, are rites by which we alchemize our world both within and without. As we transform the energies inside ourselves, we transform the energies of earth" (16). Also, Biedermann notes that the



alchemists' "version of how matter is constituted is not totally dissimilar to the modern account, proposed by atomic physicists" (330). A curious reader seeking answers to today's problems might do well to become more aware of the many parallels between the history of the past and the questions of the present. Perhaps we are on the verge of another Renaissance.

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*Nancy Howell*



# Essays

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## The Spirit Of Self Expression

**F**lowers seem to tumble from my fingertips, through a bag, onto a cake. Like thoughts, out they pour. My hand squeezes a funnel-shaped bag with icing in it. On the end of the bag is a tip. Some tips are for swirly looking decorations, like those fancy swags around the sides of cakes. Other tips have little tiny holes in the ends for dots or for writing. The tips are tools for anything in the imagination. I can change the tips whenever I feel like it. When I squeeze the bag a certain way my flowers and borders come out. This process makes me a cake decorator.

Cake decorating was my life almost every day for fifteen years. One day the decorating became my salvation, a way out, a means of expressing myself. Salvation breeds self-expression. I cannot separate the two. The first meaning of salvation, according to the dictionary, is the preservation or deliverance from sin. Of course, that means people would have to feel as if they needed to be redeemed from sin. I do not, so my salvation is from difficulty.

Self-expression can develop by accident, as a by-product of salvation. To me, self-expression is yourself coming out. Oh sure, the dictionary says it's expressing one's own personality, as through an act or speech. The truth, though, as I see it, is that the act or speech is just the carrier. Self-expression is really the feeling, not the act. We crave that feeling. We seek it all of our lives. We need it to escape from the tough times. It is the beauty a human brings to something, a release of the spirit, a surprise for your heart.

Revelation must be added to salvation and self-expression; like triple railroad tracks, they run beside each other. Officially, revelation is the act of revealing something, especially something that is surprising. Cake decorating did parallel revelation for me as it did for April Marsh in "Twirler." I did not see God or feel his presence as April did with her twirling, but I was surprised that I could reach self-expression through such an ordinary skill as cake decorating. I did not plan to seek either salvation or self-expression. Thankfully, they both appeared as a surprise, a revelation.

The whole ordeal started with my husband's goal to open a business, which

turned out to be a bakery. His dream became mine as I joined in the planning. He asked me to help by learning to decorate cakes. I became the person Marge Piercy writes about in "To Be Of Use." I was propelled to work as hard as I could to make the business a success, the hardest I had ever worked. I took on tasks of mopping floors so huge you could roller skate across them. I washed dishes for hours a day, monstrous pans with dough stuck all over them. While working these eighteen hour days, my life narrowed to work and family.

A wisp of sunlight started to develop; the task of decorating cakes was becoming easier. I had spent at least five hours a day tediously learning every detail of roses and leaves and borders. I always stood slightly humped over a white table with plastic containers of mixed icings, maybe ten at a time all around, the most beautiful shades you can imagine, like colors from a wedding or a baby's first birthday. I loved almost all of them.

Think about this: all of those colors are life. I have mixed the colors for each of them. The white frosting is the beginning; it is combined with color from a jar. More color for dark, less for pastels. Pastels are my favorites, like light touches of life, not too harsh or overwhelming, but kind and gentle. I mixed them all by hand, by memory, by an internal picture.

First, I would force myself to frost the cake slowly, in hopes it would look perfect. I did not want any crumbs to show through. Second, I did the borders so carefully each swirl had its own place. The next to the last step was putting on the message. I always wrote the message before the flowers so I could get carried away with the flowers and not worry about the space for the words. At this point, I felt relief. Oh, it was tense; I still had to please the customer in the end, but my favorite step was coming—the flowers. You see, I had learned a trick. I could put pictures of flowers in my head while doing the other hated jobs — always planning how to arrange the flowers on the next cake. That was my secret sunshine.

I now have flowers in my head all the time. It feels good. I have never met anyone who said that he or she understands what I am talking about. The important thing is I have the flowers in me, and I know they are beautiful. Sometimes it feels like they are dancing. What a saving grace it is to be able to enter the world of flowers in my head. I've always wanted to love myself. It's easier to love the flowers inside of me.

Self-expression feels to me like having a friend, like the beauty I could go to in my head and produce on a cake. Self-expression is like pouring flowers on a

cake, just as pouring your heart out to a friend is relaxing. It is beauty you create from yourself, the deepest thoughts from your brain, a peace and rest amidst heartache and hard work, a salvation.

I have no need for salvation today. My fingers will hardly squeeze the bag. Fifteen years was long enough. Of course, you know the flowers are still inside of me. I can visit the flowers in my heart anytime I want. There is nothing better in life, nothing more expressive, nothing more fulfilling, than the feeling I have created by self-expression. It is mine. No one can take it away. No one can touch it. It is in me for as long as I choose. I own it. I can take it with me on my sickest day. It is my feeling, my self, my expression of self. I can see the flowers right now. I am arranging them perfectly.



## Stepping Stones to Power

When I first heard of the words *discrimination*, *prejudice*, and *oppression*, they existed in reference to Negro people. As a teenage girl, it did not occur to me that those words would ever pertain to women. "Negro" was what we called colored people. Colored people were pitied because they had no rights and no power. They were a class of people whose attitudes appeared full of hatred. Their existence seemed to depend on being subservient to white people.

There is no definitive behavioral separation between gender equality, racial equality, or human equality. They all feel the same. Equal power is the need. Power is the source of energy, vigor, and efficiency. To be powerful means to perform effectively. To be invulnerable or invincible is impossible. The importance of empowering our human "self" is what we are talking about.

As a young wife in my twenties, I learned quickly about gender preference, gender put-downs, gender-bias, and in short, the grand ability of the males in my acquired family to tout their pseudo-superiority. Four male siblings and a father dominated the family. The mother existed, but her duties were clear: to keep the house clean, to fix meals, and to make sure the needs of the family were met. My husband's three brothers and my father-in-law did not pretend to have any interest in the female mind. Concepts presented by my female voice were not heard. I don't remember being taken seriously or allowed to finish a sentence. I remember being "teased" about everything conceivable, given chocolates, and laughed at if I played the wrong card in a poker game.

I began to evaluate the gender/human equality issue. My first emerging rebellious thought was, "What in the world makes these men act like they have some inborn superior ability to play poker?" Learning every poker strategy became my goal, my own personal struggle to represent women in this untapped male territorial area. Surprisingly to me, tempers of the male species flared when my female "self" would win. I had pictured praise spewing forth. Instead, hostility surrounded my tactical prowess. The game was relatively simple. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe I had discovered the secret – poker is no big deal. I could only conclude that hostility might be the price of power. I knew I had mastered the game. The question inside of me was, "Why aren't these men more

accepting?" The second conclusion, in my mind, was that these men needed to feel superior and I had stepped into their world. Power had become mine. The power was unequal. They were stuck in prejudice, and I had surged forward. I could now afford to be tolerant of their hostile attitudes.

Discrimination and prejudice are passed down through generations. Fortunately, human attitudes and behaviors can change. My husband is the best example I have ever seen. A generation ago, the word *nigger* flowed freely in his daily conversation. "Queer jokes" were common forms of entertainment. No more. He has evolved into what I call a "humanist." He is an example of someone rising above the inherent prejudices that flow within his relatives. Today there is no scoffing at homosexuals and there are no references to "niggers." He knows women and men are equal, whether in poker or life. He knows with clarity and insight the need of all humans for respect. To break away from taught prejudices is to be liberated.

Oppression wrecks our minds. We begin to doubt ourselves. When oppression and sarcasm are the teachers of our youth, weakness is the result. Sarcasm is an oppressing tool used by many people. All sarcasm is a mockery. Therefore, sarcasm is not acceptable. Sarcasm is usually followed by, "Oh, I'm just kidding," or a wink, or, "Can't you take a joke?" It is preceded by a remark such as "Hey, you are really stupid," or "Don't you know anything, ha ha?" The giver of sarcasm is trying to veil his belittling in ambiguity. Its purpose is to allow the purveyor an edge in a discussion. It plants doubt. The user knows this. Like oppression, it hinders us in our ability to liberate the individual human person inside of us. The umbrella of sarcasm is opened to keep us in someone's shadow.

Almost twenty-five years ago, I started my own private tradition. As I prepare to blow out the candles on my birthday cake, I wish that the world could discover peace and true freedom. I wish for this, not only because there is so much unfairness in the world, but because if people were satisfied with their own lives, they would leave others alone to think and to develop. That is the base of the women's battle.

In my youth I laughed at pornography. To go into a bar with nude pictures of women didn't bother me. I had to learn respect for my gender. It was not taught to me as a youth. The solution is to teach our children to expect, to understand, and to give the respect all humans deserve. Sexual remarks, gestures, pictures, and touches are passed off as jokes, or as never happening. Sexual harassment is explained away. It is impossible to fight some of this.



Decisions have to be made daily as to what extent to pursue issues. The decisions need to be based on what the hope is to accomplish. Respect cannot be won in a court of law. If temporarily tolerating certain behaviors will ultimately propel women into a superior position, then that is what women must do. The goal should be to ignore and avoid hostility while rising to the highest potential possible. Hostility holds us down.

We can be powerful human women and defenders of our gender without being stuck in animosity and vengeance. Females need to surge ahead without dwelling on being victims mired in the constant issues of feminism. It is impossible to change the minds of some people. Therefore, instead of stagnating in a world of futile battles, women must project forward and leave behind those people stuck in prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. Instead of looking for proof of gender bias, shift to actions of gender-power. Learn the strategies of the game. Just as in that poker game a generation ago, the power became mine when I developed the skill to play. Achievement was worth the price. The true prize was learning that I stand equal in ability.

Just as so many people claim to be tired of hearing African-Americans complain about what America has done to them, so must America tire of women complaining about what men are doing to oppress women. As with the lessons from The Holocaust, Martin Luther King, Jr., and all of history, women should not bury themselves in the past, but they should glance back in humble recognition, as they surge ahead into the power of being a human woman.

The clever women have moved forward into successes, showing the remarkableness of being female. They have opened the doors for those following behind. Intelligent women have learned to use tolerance as a stepping stone to power. Tolerance is not submission. It is a clever subterfuge to sneak past the enemy we call prejudice.



## Love Rekindled?

**T**he organ begins to play as her heart rate increases. "This is it," she thinks, "the moment every woman has waited for since being a little girl." She remembers how beautiful her older sister looked on that day so many years ago. Now it is her turn to be the angelic awe of admiration. The others have taken their places and have set the stage for the featured fascination.

All the heads in the building turn together as if they are connected with one attenuated thread and controlled by some greater force of homage. She wonders if her legs can support the flimsy mass which she calls her body. Then it happens. Her father caresses her arm and squires her down the aisle between all of these attentive eyes. She looks up to see her final destination and he smiles, a smile of uneasiness. That is the same smile as when they first met. She thinks back to her first day in the new high school when she saw this same unsure smile approach her. That is all it took from that moment on. The rest of their days to this single moment flash by like a fury of colors. They seem to form a rainbow; with a pot of gold?

"Do you, John, take Beth to be your wife?"

"I do," still with some signs of tension in his voice.

"Do you, Beth, take John to be your husband?"

"I do," with the confidence that would make a trained thespian jealous.

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

The fire started, the candle lit, the wax beginning to drip, as the new couple begin their journey into "until death do you part."

Drip . . . drip . . . drip. The wax begins to fall. The fire turns in upon itself, consuming what it feeds off to survive. . . .

. . . The years pass by, the time clicks on, children born, tears are cried, age makes its subtle appearance through tough times.

The late night waits, the shouting, the screaming, the children's cry of desperation. They say it isn't a crime.

The crack of a jaw, the blood, the tears. What happened to those joyous days?

The dark, dark bruises, the lies that are said. What happened to the rainbows of May?

The long, hard fight, the endless struggle. This will be the last fight!

The midnight hours, the liquor stench, the flying fist. This is the last night!

Drip...drip...drip. Red, yellow and blue begin to swell as the wax dwindles down the candle. . . .

"Mrs. Simpson it is with the consent of the court that I pronounce you guilty of all charges. Your children will be placed in foster care until a later date. It is with great remorse that I should pass the sentence of life in prison for your evil crime. I just hope you have not scarred your children for life."

"I saved my children, I saved my children, I saved my . . . ."

. . . Drip . . . drip . . . drip. The wax has been consumed by the fire of love. The wax runs out; the fire will die. The fire will be no more, the heart will turn cold, the night will fall. Maybe the fire of love doesn't need wax to bur— SLAM!

*Nancy Howell*





## Contributors

**Nancy Farthing** discovered the passion and joy of writing when she started at Purdue North Central in the summer of 1993. “I was fortunate to have Dr. P. Buckler and Prof. G. Lewis praise and inspire me.” Currently studying psychology and English, she plans to finish her degree and continue writing.

**Nancy Howell’s** consuming journey toward an English degree will be tempered by her husband’s major in math and her ten-year-old son’s major in spontaneous humor.

**Kathy Hutcherson** is an English major who lives in Michigan City with her husband, David, and two cats, Walter and Rose.

**Sharon Koelm** is a junior currently pursuing her Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Her work has appeared previously in *Portals*.

**Bonney Leckie** is a part-time graduate student and full-time teacher at Chesterton High School. She feels that writing is a way of learning about yourself – what you believe, what you are.

**Stephanie Parnell**, married and working as a waitress, will graduate from the nursing program in December. She plans to continue studying nursing at Valparaiso University. To relieve stress, she prays, walks, and writes. She hopes her story helps other students, or at least gives them a chuckle.

**Susan D. Pedue**, a thirty-eight-year-old senior, is presently making arrangements for receiving her bachelors degree from Purdue North Central. She has already been published twice and is doing some serious work in literary criticism. She intends to acquire her Ph.D and to lecture at the college level, but presently lectures occasionally.

**Lynn Przybylinski** lives in LaPorte with her husband, two cats, one dog, and three horses. Her two daughters attend Indiana University in Bloomington. She has worked at the Post Office in Beverly Shores for twenty-two years. Lynn expects to earn a Bachelors of Liberal Studies degree.

**Joseph E. Reeves** believes that writing is a projector that exhibits the true "images from within" one's soul. Contrary to popular belief, his inspirations are not drug-induced, but rather from being dropped too many times on his head when he was a young, impressionable child with a not-yet-formed skull.

**Marietta Rogers** is a senior at Purdue University North Central, where she is also employed. She is pursuing Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and elementary education. Marietta enjoys both theatre and literature, and encourages everyone to support the arts.

**Michael Charles Szymanski** was born in Valparaiso and has lived in Indiana for most of his life. He is majoring in English, and he looks forward to teaching English and literature at the college level while continuing to evolve as a writer. He is working on several short stories and a novel.

**Denise Underwood-Martine** is a full-time student currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

**Traci Wozniak** cites Howard S. Becker on the interpretation of a photograph: "Every question we ask of a photograph can be put, and therefore answered, in more than one way. Different questions are not the right or wrong way to ask (or answer); they are just different."







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